

Psalm 33 is closely linked to Psalm 32 which may account for the absence of a superscription. The joys of forgiveness, experienced by the upright in heart, launch the true worshiper into the exuberance of Psalm 33. Silence, broken in confession, leads to songs of deliverance. The closing benediction of Psalm 32, “Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!” leads to the opening exhortation of Psalm 33: “Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him.”

Psalm 33 does what similar creation/instruction psalms do for worship (see Psalms 8, 19, 24, 25, 29). The troubles and laments of the people of God are reset in the big picture of God’s faithfulness. The focus shifts from our problems to God’s sovereignty, providential protection, and unfailing love. Forgiveness gives the worshiper a fresh start and the psalmist capitalizes on this wonderful opportunity for the people of God. At its most basic, worship is telling the truth about God, who he is and what he has done. Psalm 33 roots this new song of praise in the blessing of God’s faithful word – the creative, electing, powerful, and redeeming word of God. We have much to sing about.

Praise the Lord

*Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous;
it is fitting for the upright to praise him.
Praise the Lord with the harp;
make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.
Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully, and shout for joy.*

Psalm 33:1-3

Worship music that is exceptional, excellent and exuberant is rooted in a redemptive relationship with Jesus Christ.¹ The righteous are called to worship. “It is fitting for the upright to praise him.” The person involved in singing and playing music is always more important than the music itself. If it were a musical performance for the sake of an audience, then this would not necessarily be true, but worship is different. A performer can sing a love song without being in love, but who can sing joyfully to the Lord, without being in worship? Who can play “to him a new song” without knowing him? This is why the preceding psalm’s emphasis on songs of deliverance is so important. Without redemption and the forgiveness of sins there is nothing to sing about joyfully and shout about exuberantly.

Bach’s music was inspired by the “Son who is the radiance of God’s glory” (Heb 1:3), not ephemeral feelings arising from his music. This is why Bach wrote in the margin of his copy of Abraham Calov’s Bible commentary on 2 Chronicles 5:13: “Where there is devotional music, God with his grace is always present.” For Bach spirituality revolved around the personal revelation of God rather than in his feelings or in his creative imagination. Worship was not

¹ Kidner, Psalms, 136. Kidner writes, “Note the call for freshness and skill as well as fervor; three qualities rarely found together in religious music.”

sentiment nor was transcendence self-generated. Yet moderns who appreciate the music of Bach want to transfer the source of inspiration away from the God who has made himself known to the music itself. Conductor John Eliot Gardiner comments on Bach's marginal note, "This strikes me as a tenet that many of us as musicians automatically hold and aspire to whenever we meet to play music, regardless of whatever 'God' we happen to believe in."²

Music belongs to God the Chief Musician, whose acoustical world resonates with song because God designed not only the voice and ear, but the heart and spirit. Whatever creativity we express comes from God the Creator who not only inspires the praise but gives us the gifts with which to express his praise. The prophet Zephaniah challenged the people of God to sing, "Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart." The reason they could sing was because God rejoiced over them in song. "The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing" (Zeph 3:14-17). The story of the people of God is not only spoken but sung. The prophet Isaiah described God's love in a love song. "I will sing to the one I love a song about his vineyard" (Isa 5:1). Jesus sang with his disciples, such as the time he sang a hymn with them at the Last Supper (Mt 26:30); and according to the author of Hebrews, he continues to sing, "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises" (Heb 2:12). To be filled with the Spirit of God is to sing and make music in our hearts to the Lord (Eph5:19-20).

From the beginning, music has accompanied the work of God. Creation was formed "while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy" (Job 38:7). Surely it is impossible for us to imagine "the heavens declaring the glory of God" in a monotone or "the skies [proclaiming] the work of his hands" in a whisper. "The hills are alive with the sound of music" is biblical truth. When Moses and the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, they celebrated the Exodus with a song to the Lord, which began, "I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted." The Lord had done more than give them something to sing about. The Lord himself was their song. Moses sang, "The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him" (Ex 15:1,2).

Filled with the Spirit, King David led the people of God in song. From lamentation to celebration, David expressed the full range of the Word of God in song. "Your decrees are the theme of my song wherever I lodge" (Ps 119:54). The Psalms call us into worship with vigorous songs of praise, "Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song" (Ps 95:1-2). Worship is exuberant, "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs" (100:1-2). It is fresh and vital, "Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples" (Ps 96:1-3). We have a song to be sung to the nations that will turn their hearts to the Lord.

Music tells God's great salvation history story in song. The dramatic turning points and

² Gardiner, *Bach*, 17.

breakthroughs in God's revelation are marked by hymns of praise. Prose gives way to poetry and dialogue to doxology. Narrative becomes declarative in anthems of praise. The Exodus is marked by the Song of Moses (Ex 15). The birth of Christ is celebrated in Mary's Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55), Zechariah's Benedictus (Lk 1:67-79), and in the Song of Simeon (Lk 2:29-32). Angels offer up an exclamation of praise in the Gloria (Lk 2:14). The song of salvation was in the confession and praise of Christ in the early church. His humility and exaltation is celebrated in Paul's letter to the believers at Philippi in what is thought to be an early worship hymn (2:6-11). Early Christians confessed in song, "He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory" (1 Tim 3:16).

There is nothing casual or cavalier about real worship. David's exhortation to "sing joyfully" to the Lord, "play skillfully" and "shout for joy" suggests a range of effort from careful preparation to joyous spontaneity. It takes skill to "make music to [the Lord] on the ten-stringed lyre," and it takes energy to "shout for joy," but neither the preparation nor the enthusiasm of worship were ever meant to obscure the reason for worship.³ The psalmist is constantly reminding us of why we are worshiping: "Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy. For the word of the Lord is right and true; he is faithful in all he does" (Ps 33:3-4).

Music must be in tune with the will of God. It is never an end in itself. To say as one disgruntled person said to me, "I worship the music!" is to turn an instrument of praise into an idol. "Unlike the artist who serves the art, we serve the God of the art."⁴

Expository Worship

*For the word of the Lord is right and true;
he is faithful in all he does.
The Lord loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of his unfailing love.
By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
their starry host by the breath of his mouth.
He gathers the waters of the sea into jars;
he puts the deep into storehouses.
Let all the earth fear the Lord;
let all the people of the world revere him.
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.*

Psalm 33:6-9

Every aspect of the worship sets the tone for the message from God's Word. Expository worship is a corollary of expository preaching, the art of letting the Bible make its own point. True Word-

³ Calvin, Psalms, 539. Calvin had a decidedly negative opinion of musical instruments. He argued that the use of instruments belonged to the law and temple worship. ". . . Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law." In an effort to distance the church from Roman Catholic worship practices, Calvin threw out the proverbial baby with the bath water.

⁴ Richard D. Dinwiddie, "The God Who Sings," Christianity Today, 7/15/83, 21.

centered doxology expresses and evokes meanings which are at once intellectual, emotional, volitional, and spiritual. Expository worship is tethered to the text and seeks to convey through every aspect of the liturgy the lived meaning of the text.⁵

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” Colossians 3:16

Music is a gift from God that helps us take in the intelligible revelation of God. The prophet Ezekiel was told, “Eat this book; then go and speak to the house of Israel.” “So I opened my mouth,” Ezekiel writes, “and he gave me the book to eat” (Ezek 3:1-2). Eating the Word of God meant internalizing the truth of God in order to empower the prophet for ministry. In that sense, singing the Word of God “with gratitude in [our] hearts to God” is another picture that helps us grasp what it means to take in the truth of God. To open our mouths and eat the Word has the same meaning as to open our mouths and sing the Word from our hearts. I remember my father’s tenor voice singing hymns of the Word more than I recall him speaking about the Word. He never gave a sermon, but he sang from his soul. One of his favorite songs reads,

“All that thrills my soul is Jesus he is more than life to me;
He, the fairest of ten thousand is my precious Lord to me.”

In his letter to the church at Ephesus Paul contrasted alcoholic intoxication with being filled with the Spirit. “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph 5:18-19). The evidence of being filled with the Spirit is an outpouring of praise and gratitude. “Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 5:19-20). Internalizing the Word of God not only nourishes the soul but it also makes the heart sing.

Led by gifted musicians and liturgists prayer and praise create a holy momentum in worship that propels the preacher and prepares the congregation for the preached word. True worship is a gift to both the congregation and the pastor. The people are prepared to receive the word of God. The preacher is standing on holy ground. Word and worship energize the congregation. In some ways, the sermon has already been preached in the hymns, in the confession, and in the prayers. Good worship creates a palpable sense of reverence and affection.

I experienced this kind of worship at Central Presbyterian Church in New York City. The credit belongs to the Holy Spirit working in and through Seth Ward who selected and arranged hymns and songs of praise in light of the biblical text, creating a momentum to the worship that was vital and reverential. Expository preaching is best served by expository worship. The household of faith is the place for good preaching. Prayers and praise set the table for biblical proclamation. It is like the family meal at Thanksgiving. The meal is special and the food tastes better because of the table fellowship. Good preaching is never self-consciously contrived for effect. It is not art

⁵ Denham, *Reverberating Word*, 6.

for art's sake. Stylistic rhetoric invariably calls attention to itself, but Spirit-inspired proclamation lifts up Jesus Christ.

*Lord of the Universe, Hope of the World*⁶

*The Lord foils the plans of the nations;
he thwarts the purposes of the peoples.
But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever,
the purposes of his heart through all generations.
Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord,
the people he chose for his inheritance.
From heaven the Lord looks down
and sees all mankind;
from his dwelling place he watches
all who live on earth –
he who forms the hearts of all,
who considers everything they do.
No king is saved by the size of his army;
no warrior escapes by his great strength.
A horse is a vain hope for deliverance;
despite all its great strength it cannot save.*

*But the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him,
on those whose hope is in his unfailing love,
to deliver them from death
and keep them alive in famine.*

Psalm 33:10-19

Worship is rooted in the sovereign Lord who rules over all creation, including galaxies, oceans, peoples, nations, and politicians. Nothing in this vast macro and micro cosmos escapes the sovereign will of God. The psalm's movement from the created order to the political realm recalls God's response to Job.

Job is led out of his confined world of suffering into the large world of God's making. There he is challenged to explain the origin of the earth, the expanse of the sea, the light of dawn, the ocean depths, the formation of snow, lightning, and rain, and the order of the stars and seasons. God's questions sound more like exclamations, designed to inspire rather than interrogate. "Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this" (Job 38:18). Job never hinted, let alone claimed to know such knowledge. It was not the Lord's intent to put Job down, but to stress, "Job! Let God be God!"

The Lord raises a similar issue over the moral realm. "Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's, and can you voice thunder

⁶ Margaret Clarkson: Hymn title, "Lord of the Universe, Hope of the World," Hope Publishing Company, 1987.

like his?" (40:8-9). Job is compelled to see that God's control extends not only to nature but to human justice as well. The message comes through loud and clear, "Job! Let God be God!"

The celebration of the Lord's sovereignty in Psalm 33 corresponds with the worship celebration in The Book of Revelation. Cosmic liturgy is inspired by cosmic rule and produces an outpouring of prayer and praise. "The people of God sing. They express exuberance in realizing the majesty of God and the mercy of Christ, the wholeness of reality and their new-found ability to participate in it. . . When persons of faith become aware of who God is and what he does, they sing. The songs are irrepressible."⁷ The book of Revelation anticipates powerful singing in the presence of God:

Hymns of adoration, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (4:8);

Songs of redemption, "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation..." (Rev 5:9);

Anthems of glory, sung with energy and enthusiasm, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" (Rev 5:12).

The reason the apostle John interchanged "saying" and "singing" in his description of Heaven's worship was because he stressed the content of the message that was sung (Rev 4:8,10; 5:9,12; 7:10,12). No matter how awesome a heavenly choir of "ten thousand times ten thousand" will sound, the message will never be lost in the power of the music (Rev 5:11).⁸ God's entire salvation history story will be set to music from "the song of Moses the servant of God" to "the song of the Lamb" and all people will worship before the "King of the ages" (Rev 15:3).

Psalm 33 celebrates the sovereignty of the Lord over nature and the nations. The plans of the nations will fail, but the plans of the Lord will endure forever. "Throughout the psalm there is a sustained contrast between the reliability of the Lord and the unreliability of everything purely human." The psalm implicitly warns against imposing on the Lord our human limitations. The Lord knows each one of us as intimately as we know our children – only better. "From heaven" does not distance the Lord from knowing, because he formed "the hearts of all." The Lord "sees all mankind . . . all who live on earth" and "considers everything they do" (Ps 33:13-14). Kings and armies represent a "a vain hope for deliverance" (Ps 33:17). The "great strength" of worldly powers is powerless to save. The psalmist contrasts geopolitical power with the Lord's personal devotion toward those who fear him. The "unfailing love" of the Lord is shown to those who reverence him; only the Lord's love is powerful to deliver from death and famine. No amount of horsepower or nuclear power, no matter how great, can deliver. The implied optimism of nationalism is set in contrast to the unfailing love of the Lord and his power to save.

Hope in the Lord

⁷ Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 66-69

⁸ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 64.

*We wait in hope for the Lord;
he is our help and our shield.
In him our hearts rejoice,
for we trust in his holy name.
May your unfailing love be with us,
Lord, even as we put our hope in you.*
Psalm 33:20-22

The joys of forgiveness inspire the people of God in worship and lead to a renewed understanding of the sovereignty of the Lord and his unfailing love. We are not resigned to wait in hope because we have run out of options and we have little else to do but trust in the Lord and hope for the best. Hope in the Lord rests in the quiet confidence and the deep assurance that the Lord will prevail against the powers of evil. Along with the psalmist we hope in the unfailing love of the Lord, who is our help, our shield, our joy and our confidence. But beyond that we follow the redemptive trajectory. We hope in the Lord, who “loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph 5:2).

“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (Eph 1:7-10).