

July 2, 2017
The Psalms: Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!
Psalm 111

The psalms are a prayer book. They help us find language to express how we feel and what we are thinking to God. Many, like Psalm 56 (last Sunday) are laments: the author pours out his heart to God and asks for wisdom and help. Some, like Psalm 111 are songs of worship and praise. The psalmist helps us find language to celebrate and glorify God. It's interesting as you read (or even just skim through) the psalms, how many of our songs – both older hymns and newer songs – lift phrases directly from the psalms. We simply can't say it any better than these ancient poets did. Let's walk through Psalm 111 ...

111:1 – Praise the Lord. This little phrase shows up time and time again in the Psalms. In Hebrew, it is two words – "*hallelu Yah*" – literally meaning "*praise God.*" So, whenever you see "*Praise the Lord*" in the Psalms, you are reading the Hebrew words, "*Hallelu-Yah!*" And whenever you sing, "*Hallelujah*" you are singing, "*Praise the Lord!*"

"I will extol the Lord with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly." The psalmist is praising God with all his heart, mind, will, everything. The Hebrew word for heart means your whole being, the essence of who you are, the "real you." In other words, worship is not something we do Sunday morning. Thankfulness, praise, and worship are the foundation of our being and a chorus that runs through our entire lives.

He is praising God in public. This is not just some personal, private devotion; the psalmist wants everyone to hear. What would we think of a person who is married, but it's secret: they are never seen in public, they never talk about it, they never seem to spend time together? We don't expect them to be obnoxious about their relationship, but there is a "normal" relationship where people are seen with, talk about, and spend time with their spouse ... What does it say about a person's relationship with God if it is so hidden no one knows about it? That doesn't mean we are obnoxious about our relationship with God, either. But at the same time, it shouldn't be a big secret we hide from people ...

111:2 – *"Great are the works of the Lord; they are pondered by all who delight in them."* These words are engraved over the entrance to the Cavendish Laboratory, University of Cambridge ("home" to 29 Nobel prize winners). The first Cavendish professor was James Clerk Maxwell, who formulated our understanding of electromagnetism, bringing together electricity, magnetism, and light as manifestations of the same phenomenon. Maxwell was a faithful elder in his church. He said, *"I think men of science as well as other men need to learn from Christ, and I think Christians whose minds are scientific are bound to study science that their view of the glory of God may be as extensive as their being is capable."*

Maxwell is part of a long tradition of people who

1. *Find their Christian faith encourages them to do science.* When you believe that God created us to be reasonable beings and that the world is a reasonable place, it

makes sense that we can know understand His creation. God gives us that (for lack of a better word) "scientific" instinct to be curious, to investigate, to test, to know, and to understand. Part of being made in His image is the quest to know and understand His truth. A scientific mindset is just a curiosity that leads us to do that. When we look at the world and ask how it works, try our ideas out, analyse the results, and draw conclusions, we are doing science – and being very human (just as God created us). Ideally, then, we can make the world a better place.

2. *Find their scientific research enlivens and inspires their Christian faith.* Alister McGrath, a biophysicist and theologian (and former atheist), writes, "*The Christian faith allows us to see further and deeper, to appreciate that nature is studded with signs, radiant with reminders, and emblazoned with symbols of God, our creator and redeemer.*" Dr. Ard Louis, Oxford theoretical physicist, explains how he sees science and faith relating to each other: faith influences and shapes the whole of his life https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfxZdMV_A5w.

If we believe God's creation **IS** God's creation, studying it and understanding it means we are learning more about God as well. Ultimately when we search for truth, if we are willing to keep on going, we will find God's signature. The book of Job asks, "*Where then does wisdom come from? Where does understanding dwell? ... God understands the way to it and he alone knows where it dwells*" (Job 28:20-23). We don't need to fear honest searching for truth; it will always lead us to God. In fact, it's part of our worship of God.

111:3 - "*Glorious and majestic are his deeds, and his righteousness endures forever.*" We praise God as we reflect on His amazing creation, and on what He has done historically and is doing now. God has done great things in the past: it's good to read Scripture, read history, and look at our own lives and see the fingerprints of God all over them. God is still be active in our world – and in our lives – today. He will continue to do so in the future. God didn't just create the world and leave it; He continues to be active in it and sustains it. He hasn't left us without hope or help; He is with us, today and always, forever.

111:4 – "*He has caused his wonders to be remembered; the Lord is gracious and compassionate.*" The author is going to remind us of some of the ways God is active in our lives and world ... And he is reminding us who our amazing God is – He is righteous, gracious, and compassionate. I'm not sure what your preconceptions of God are, but these are key aspects of God's character we need to focus on ...

- God is righteous: what does that mean?
- God is gracious: what does that mean?
- God is compassionate: what does that mean?

111:5 – God is active in our lives, personally, in the ordinary, mundane blessings we often just take for granted: "*He provides food for those who fear him; he remembers his covenant forever.*" When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "*Give us this day our daily bread.*" Then we rarely even give a thought to the fact that He answers our prayer! We

seldom pause and thank God for the everyday things we take for granted: our country, our city, our homes, our food, our families, our friends, our church, our health ... It is good for us to do that, especially on the Canada Day weekend. What are you thankful for? Let's pause a moment and thank God for some of those taken-for-granted blessings ...

111:6 – sometimes God does do specific, incredible miracles. *"He has shown his people the power of his works, giving them the lands of other nations."* As we look back in Scripture, God does do some amazing things like bring His people out of Egypt, and bring them back from exile in Babylon. These don't happen all the time. He doesn't always answer every prayer, instantly. But sometimes God does do incredible – miraculous – things in our lives, too. Let's thank God for some of those things ...

111:7-9 – All of this is wrapped up in worship and celebration of who God is. Who is God? What is He like? The psalmist has already made the point that God is righteous, gracious, and compassionate. The author goes on: *"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."*

- God is faithful: what does that mean?
- God is just: what does that mean?
- God is trustworthy: what does that mean?
- God is upright: what does that mean?
- God saves: what does that mean?
- God is holy: what does that mean?
- God is awesome: what does that mean?
- God ordains/creates covenant with us: what does that mean?
- God doesn't change: what does that mean?

111:10 – The psalmist concludes with a "So what?" application – a teachable moment: *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding."* "Fear of the Lord" does not mean terror of some malevolent beast! We have just talked about who our gracious, compassionate, loving God is! However, there is a profound awe, reverence, respect, and wonder that comes as we get to know this God.

We love Him – and we know He loves us – we also live with a sense of reverent awe and wonder of who God is ... and that He loves us with a covenant love that will not let us go.

On the one hand, God is so far beyond us – the creator of billions of stars in billions of galaxies: we need that BIG God to deal with the big issues of life. On the other hand, He is the God who loves us intimately, and invites us into His grace and compassion: we need this personal Saviour and Comforter who is with us through the ups and downs of life.

111:10 – *"To him belongs eternal praise."* How can I make praise more a part of my life?

In our busy, crazy lives, it is very possible to never pray. When that happens, we can get in a downward spiral where life gets more and more miserable. Something is wrong at the core of our being – and it affects everything.

The psalms challenge us to see things in bigger perspective: Long before we were born, God loved us. Long after we die, God will love us. He loves us from eternity to eternity.

The psalms invite us to know this God in a deeply personal way. It isn't easy. It doesn't come naturally. We need to be honest about that. In Scripture, it is always presented as a moment-by-moment challenge. I love this old Celtic prayer:

Lord, help my thoughts!

They stray from me, setting off on the wildest journeys.

When I am in church, they run off like naughty children, quarrelling and making trouble.

When I read the Bible, they fly off to a distant city, filled with beautiful women.

My thoughts can cross an ocean with a single leap;

they can fly from earth to heaven and back gain in a single second.

They come to me for a fleeting moment, and then way they flee.

No chains, no locks can hold them; no threats of punishment can restrain them.

No hiss of a lash can frighten them.

They slip from my grasp like eels;

they swoop hither and thither like swallows in flight.

Dear Christ, who can see into every heart and read every mind, take hold of my thoughts.

Bring my thoughts back to me, and hold me close to Yourself.

Our lives can become like an old computer that runs slower and slower and is buggier and buggier. Sometimes we feel like we're pressing the keys but nothing is happening. We need to reboot our lives. We may need to reformat our lives. We may need to turn everything off. Take some time. Rethink our priorities. We need to look for some of those spiritual viruses that sabotage our lives. We need to delete some of those things that are running in our lives that are just making life messy. We need to restore the important settings. We choose to restart only what is really, really important. We let the rest go.

Lord, take hold of our thoughts. Bring them back to You. Hold us close to Yourself. Help us to worship. Help us to praise. Help us to love you with reverence and awe. We know you are the beginning of wisdom; help us to follow your ways ...

Copyright ©2017 by Bruce Martin
First Baptist Church
1614 – 5th Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3
(403) 327-2082
bruce@firstb.net