

GOD IS GREAT Psalm 135:1-18

Objective: To help adults live in awe of the greatness of God.

I saw an article just recently that reported on the death of a little-known man named Norman Borlaug who had died at age 95. What caught my eye was a claim that this man could arguably be the greatest person who lived in the 20th Century. How could it happen that someone of this importance not be well known? What did he do? According to the writer, Dr. Borlaug saved the world. By now, my curiosity is really revved up and I read further. It turns out that he was a plant scientist who developed high yield grains that prevented the population explosion of the 20th Century from causing mass starvation and deforestation of the planet. After his grains were introduced in Pakistan, they were self-sufficient in three years. India became self-sufficient in six years. Someone did notice: he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1970. So, one could argue that he was a great person. We've heard of Mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer, and many others who have been called great people.

If you made a list of those whom you would consider to be great, what criteria would you use to put someone on the list? [Helped others, made great sacrifices, not concerned about wealth, did not care about fame, and other similar qualities might be on the list.] Which of the items on your list of criteria would you say are exemplary of the character of God? We might then make the argument that if one were to follow the example set by God, then greatness would be a natural result.

As we study Psalm 135, we will be looking for evidence of God's greatness and reasons why we would praise Him. According to C. H. Spurgeon, this psalm is made up of choice selections from other Scriptures and put together in a way that it has the continuity and freshness of an original poem. We can divide the chapter into various descriptions of God: Good (1-4), Creator (5-7), Redeemer (8-12), Judge (13-14), Living Lord (15-18).

GOD IS GOOD

¹Praise the LORD! Praise the name of the LORD; Praise *Him*, O servants of the LORD, ²You who stand in the house of the LORD, In the courts of the house of our God! ³Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; Sing praises to His name, for it is lovely. ⁴For the LORD has chosen Jacob for Himself, Israel for His own possession. Psalm 135:1-4 (NASB)

We find that this psalm is a call to praise the Lord. Specifically, we are to praise His name or His character. We could make a list of the superlatives that could be used to describe the nature of God that would fill pages. The point is that we will not run out of descriptors that are worthy of praise. In Psalms 34 we see that "His praise shall continually be in my mouth."

Next, we are told "who" is to lead in the praise of God. These are the servants of the Lord and the next verse gives us a description of the servants - those who stand in the house of the Lord and in the courts. The intent was likely to be a reference to the Levites who were expected to lead the people during times of worship. The Levites served as priests (those who represent man to God) under the Old Covenant. With the New Covenant we learn that all of us are a kingdom of priests unto God. Therefore, the admonition to praise the Lord as His servants would apply to us.

In this group of verses we find the reasons that we should praise God. The first is that He is good. The Hebrew word translated as "good" means pleasant, agreeable, and beneficial. We

normally think of “good” in the context of “God is good” as morally pure but it can mean much more. You recall that the “rich young ruler” addressed Jesus as “Good Master” and Jesus challenged him by asking, “why do you call me “good,” there is none good except God. The Greek word used in the Matthew passage has implications of excellent, upright, pleasant and agreeable. The second part of verse three reinforces this same idea by telling us to praise God’s name (character) because it (His character) is pleasant or lovely (which is a synonym of good). We could make the argument that singing praise is pleasant, and while that may be true, it is not the context of the passage.

The very next verse gives us additional reason to praise God and that is because of His electing love. God chose Jacob. This was pure and simple election by the sovereign will of God and was not based on any merit of Jacob nor was it based on the traditions of man. It could not have been based on Jacob’s merit because the choice was made and communicated to his mother before Jacob and Esau were born. It was not based on the traditions of man because Jacob was not the firstborn.

How does that fact apply to us and give us reason to praise God? The Puritan preacher Thomas Manton (1620 - 1677) observed the following:

Many have not the knowledge of God, and others live in the church but are carnal; and for me to be one of his peculiar people, a member of Christ’s mystical body, oh! what a privilege is this! And then what moved him to all this? Nothing but his own free grace. Therefore praise the Lord. . . Then consider how many are left to perish in the wide world. Some live out of the church’s pale that never heard of Christ, and many others have only a loose general form of Christianity. Oh! blessed be God that hath chosen me to be of the number of his peculiar people.

The second part of verse four shows us that not only did God choose Jacob but He also elevated him to a higher status than he was when he was chosen. Jacob, the supplanter or grabber, became Israel (“God prevails”) because God worked on his behalf and brought Jacob to a point of a personal confrontation with Himself. He who was self-sufficient became one who was dependent upon God.

We could ask the same question as before: How does this apply to us? When we were chosen by God, we did not have anything of merit to commend ourselves to God; however, He took us and made us one of His sons. The pride that comes from an attitude of “independence” is replaced with the humility that comes from an attitude of “total dependency on God.” That is reason enough for us to praise God.

GOD IS CREATOR - HE IS GREAT

⁵For I know that the LORD is great And that our Lord is above all gods. ⁶Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps. ⁷He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth; Who makes lightnings for the rain, Who brings forth the wind from His treasures. Psalm 135:5-7 (NASB95)

The emphasis in these three verses is on the greatness of God as seen in the functioning of His created world (sky, land, seas and caves). The examples mentioned are all weather related. The clouds appear to rise on the horizon, and lightning is associated with rain and wind seems to just come out of nowhere. The psalmist realized that all these things function according to the way God designed them to function. The physical world operates according to the will and pleasure of God.

For example, we know there could be no life (as we know it) without water. The water molecule is one of God’s marvels. This molecule is lighter than air (a mixture of oxygen and nitrogen) and that is good in that water vapor rises and clouds are formed high above the earth and we are not generally in a state of fog at ground level. Consider also that when water freezes

it reaches its maximum density at about 39 degrees and then gets lighter as it gets colder. Why is that important? Lakes and ponds and rivers do not freeze from the bottom up but from the top down. If ice were denser than water, then much of the planet would not be people-friendly.

If we concentrate only on the marvels of creation mentioned in these verses, then we may miss another good reason to praise the Lord. Notice that verse five makes a simple statement “for I know. . .” Think about the fact that we have been given enough insight and revelation to be able to say “I know.” In his book, *The Spiritual Man*, Watchman Nee makes the assertion that all we **know** is a result of revelation from God. Each of us has a lot of information running around in our heads and much of that information is a result of something you have read, been told, or have seen. Some may be so bold as to say, I know it is true because I read it in the paper. Most people would laugh at you if you said that. We also realize that things we see can be deceptive. “Knowing” is something quite different from just having information. The fact that God reveals Himself to us so that we can KNOW that God exists and that He is the Creator of the world in which we live is surely good reason to praise Him.

GOD IS REDEEMER AND JUDGE

⁸He smote the firstborn of Egypt, Both of man and beast. ⁹He sent signs and wonders into your midst, O Egypt, Upon Pharaoh and all his servants. ¹⁰He smote many nations And slew mighty kings, ¹¹Sihon, king of the Amorites, And Og, king of Bashan, And all the kingdoms of Canaan; ¹²And He gave their land as a heritage, A heritage to Israel His people. ¹³Your name, O LORD, is everlasting, Your remembrance, O LORD, throughout all generations. ¹⁴For the LORD will judge His people And will have compassion on His servants. Psalm 135:8-14 (NASB95)

With these verses the composer of the psalms switched from God’s revelation of Himself as the Creator to His role of Redeemer. Just as we in the church are drawn to the Cross as the pivotal point in history, the Israelites saw their delivery from slavery in Egypt and taking possession of the Promised Land as the pivotal point in their history.

In the examples cited, we find not only the redemptive action of God but we also see the **judgment** of God on the Egyptians. If you think about it, the death of the first born of man and beast was a devastating (maybe even a harsh) blow to the Egyptians. However, when you put it in context of the action of the Egyptians some 80 years earlier in decreeing that all the male newborns of the Israelites were to be killed, it seems like just retribution.

That raises an interesting question: Does God’s redemption of those who put their trust in Him also have an implication of God’s judgment upon those who do not trust in him? Another way to ask this question would be, does your acceptance of God’s provision of salvation condemn those who reject it? It is not that you are acting as a judge but by your example you demonstrate that the Plan of Salvation is reasonable and understandable and that anyone can enter in. It is like Noah who condemned the world when he was obedient to God and built an ark. Another example would be the people of Nineveh (who repented under the preaching of Jonah) would rise up in condemnation of the Jews who rejected Jesus. I have heard various preachers today claim that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah would rise up in judgment of our present generation and its practices.

In a sense, the redemption of Israel from Egyptian slavery was a “national testimony” of salvation. They could cite the miraculous things God did during that time. While we (as Christians) do not have a “national testimony” we could make the argument that we have a “church testimony” that would include the events surrounding Jesus’ arrest, trial, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. We should also have

“personal testimony” of what happened in our individual lives at the point of our experiencing the work of the cross that is our redemption.

Under the idea of “God is Redeemer” we saw the judgment of God against those who reject and oppose Him. We are also reminded that God also judges His own people. The judgment of God on His people is a correcting and redemptive judgment that is designed to cause repentance and restoration of a right relationship with God. This is quite different from the judgment on the world in general. However, we can make the argument that God’s judgment of the world has a purpose of warning them and bringing conviction. In that sense, all of God’s judgments before the outpouring of the wrath of God have a redemptive purpose.

GOD IS THE LIVING LORD

¹⁵The idols of the nations are *but* silver and gold, The work of man’s hands. ¹⁶They have mouths, but they do not speak; They have eyes, but they do not see; ¹⁷They have ears, but they do not hear, Nor is there any breath at all in their mouths. ¹⁸Those who make them will be like them, *Yes*, everyone who trusts in them. Psalm 135:15-18 (NASB95)

In a sense we could say that this psalm shows a series of comparisons. God is good and God is great. God redeems and God judges. We now see a comparison or contrast of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the idols of the nations. These four verses are dripping with sarcasm. People who get involved in idol worship do not think to ask the question: Which is greater, the hands of the artisan or the object he fashioned? If one were to be logical, then the statue (if it had any life) should worship the artisan. In the same way, an argument against worshiping the sun or the moon can be made by asking the same question: Which is greater the creator or the thing created?

If we look only at the obvious - how totally silly it is for a person to bow down and worship an inanimate object - then we miss the more subtle implication that the idol is merely a representative of some spiritual entity that we might call “powers and principalities” in the spiritual realm (the heavens). You might get a person to stop doing homage to an idol, but it is much more difficult to get the person to stop trusting in the spiritual entity that the idol represents.

There is a significant truth sort of buried in this denunciation of idols. The psalmist made the statement that those who worshiped lifeless idols would become like the idols they worship. This may simply mean that just as the idol cannot see, hear, and breath; then those worshipers will have ears that cannot hear, eyes that cannot see and be void of the breath of life (no spiritual life). We see a similar recitation (having ears and eyes but not hearing nor seeing) in the words of Isaiah the prophet and in what Jesus said about the Jews of His day. The more serious concern is that we take on the spiritual characteristics of that which we worship. If we worship wealth, then we take on the characteristic of greed, if we worship fame, then we may take on pride and vanity as a characteristic. If we worship power, then we may be ruthless and merciless in our dealing with others. The good news is that if we truly worship the Living Lord, then we will take on His character of love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, meekness, goodness, moderation, and faithfulness.