

The Power of the Lord Almighty

Psalm 29

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Those of you who have been part of the Union Church for a long time may remember the Associate Pastor before me, John Earle. John was a former professional football player who loves the Lord and has a passion for telling others about Him. When I was in high school, John helped coach our football team. During that time, I learned that he's a big goofball and a very excitable guy. If you ever needed a hype man, he was your guy. I also came to understand just how strong he was.

One day in the weight room, John was doing bench press and asked if I could spot him. I looked at the pile of weight stacked on the bar, did some quick math, and realized the amount he was bench pressing was more than I could deadlift! I also remember one time in practice when John used me to demonstrate the proper way to hit someone. I was not prepared for the fact that he was going to hit me at full strength. It was the hardest I'd been hit by a guy just coming out of a stance.

Those experiences have changed the way I watch professional sports. Sometimes we watch them and think we could do what they do, that they're basically just a little better athlete than we are. I learned that professional athletes are on a whole different level. John wasn't a superstar in the league but seeing his strength and speed up close and personal reminded me that professional athletes are not like the rest of us.

In some small way, that's really the point of Psalm 29, except its focus is not to compare us to professional athletes but to the Lord God Almighty. The whole psalm reflects on the power and strength of our God. You might ask why David would devote an entire psalm to this. The answer is our faith is anchored to our view of God. A weak God leads to weak faith. A strong God leads to strong faith. David wants us to see the strength of our God so we will trust and worship Him as He deserves.

Background

The name of God is used 18 times in these 11 verses! Each of these references uses the covenant name of God, which is indicated in most versions of the Bible by using small caps. So, each time we read "the LORD" in these verses, David is referring to the God of Israel by name. This name is Yahweh or Jehovah. The name of the Lord was written as YHWH, so when you insert vowels, you can arrive at either name. Regardless, David makes clear he is talking about the God of the Bible in this psalm.

We should also note that this passage uses a lot of imagery. David uses these images to paint a picture bigger than the images themselves. Because of this, there are different ways to view them. There are basically two that I think are valid. One is that these images are just intended to show us God's power in comparison to creation. The other is that the images also compare the Lord's power to the false gods of the region. I think both approaches to this passage are valid, so we're going to look at this psalm using insights from both approaches.

Honor the Lord

David begins with a call to honor the Lord or to give Him glory.

Honor the Lord, you heavenly beings; honor the Lord for his glory and strength.

² Honor the Lord for the glory of his name. Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness. (Psalm 29:1-2, NLT)

The opening verses lay out David's intention in writing this psalm. It is a call to honor the Lord and to worship Him for His holiness. That part is clear. The question is, who are the heavenly beings to whom David speaks in v. 1? This is one of the places where there are different answers depending on how you approach this psalm. I think both are valid (and both may have even been intended by David).

The first is to see David addressing all the parts of God's creation, including angels, human beings, animals, and the inanimate objects of the universe to praise the Lord. That certainly seems consistent with the tenor of the passage and is certainly an appropriate way to understand what David was saying.

But if you look at this passage as a condemnation of the false gods of the region then the "heavenly beings" may be David calling these false gods to worship the Lord for His glory and strength. This view has the role of not only highlighting the power of the Lord, but also highlighting the lack of power of these false gods. It brings to mind the story of Dagon, the false god of the Philistines. When the ark of the covenant was captured and put in Dagon's temple, they found their idol face down in front of the ark the next day. After setting it back up, they came back the next day to find that not only was Dagon face down before the ark, but his arms were broken off as well. It's distinctly possible that David was calling these false gods to worship the Lord, just as had happened with Dagon. I think both approaches are valid and helpful.

But there's one more question we must answer to properly understand these opening verses. What does glory mean? Glory is a term we often use to describe God, and we talk about His splendor and His worthiness to be worshiped as part of that definition. While those are good ways of describing what glory means, the Hebrew word carries the idea of weight or heaviness. The glory of God is the heaviness of His character. When we come to grips with just how great the Lord is, we feel a weight. That weight is the acknowledgement of just how much He deserves to be praised. We feel compelled to worship Him, because who He is weighs heavily upon our hearts.

This is why many people try to diminish the character of God. They try to make Him a magic genie they can pull out when they need a miracle, but otherwise leave sitting on a bookshelf. They try to avoid having to recognize the greatness of His character by diminishing His holiness, explaining away His creation, or simply comparing Him to things we are comfortable with (the image of a kindly old grandparent who gently smiles at everything we do is a popular one). When we see God's character in its fullness, the weight of that reality drives us to worship and submission. That weight is precisely why so many want to diminish God's character. David is calling us to do the opposite in these verses. He says to look full into the face and character of our God. Feel the

weight of who He is, and allow that to drive you to worship, because it is the only appropriate response.

The Voice of the Lord

In the next section, David points to God's overwhelming power by comparing Him to a storm. The best way to understand these words is to imagine yourself in the midst of a raging thunderstorm aboard a ship. Picture yourself in choppy waters, fighting off seasickness because of the rocking of the ship, drenched to the bone by the crashing waves and pouring rain, turning away from the wind because the force of the rain hitting your face is painful, and overwhelmed by the deafening sound of the wind, the waves, and the thunder and lightning. This is the image we should have in mind as we read David's words in verses 3-9.

³ The voice of the Lord echoes above the sea. The God of glory thunders. The Lord thunders over the mighty sea. ⁴ The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic. ⁵ The voice of the Lord splits the mighty cedars; the Lord shatters the cedars of Lebanon. ⁶ He makes Lebanon's mountains skip like a calf; he makes Mount Hermon leap like a young wild ox. ⁷ The voice of the Lord strikes with bolts of lightning. ⁸ The voice of the Lord makes the barren wilderness quake; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. ⁹ The voice of the Lord twists mighty oaks and strips the forests bare. In his Temple everyone shouts, "Glory!" (Psalm 29:3-9, NLT)

This section points us to the power of God, and the best comparison is to the incredible power we see in nature. A couple of years ago, our town was hit by a derecho, a storm with devastating straight-line winds. I was not here when it happened, but returned to town a couple days later (after much cleanup had already happened) and was shocked by the destruction I saw. In my own yard, several massive trees were snapped like toothpicks from the winds. Sitting through such a storm, you hunker down, realizing you are utterly powerless to do anything to stop it. David draws on that experience we have all had and said that in comparison to the power of our God, these things are nothing.

The best picture of this is probably seen with Jesus and His disciples, when they were in just such a storm. They were in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, which was known for having violent storms that materialized with little warning. One such storm came up, and these men, many of whom were experienced fishermen, used to being out on the Sea of Galilee in storms, became fearful they were going to die. They woke Jesus (who was sleeping through it all) and accused Him of not caring that they were going to die. Jesus stood up, and spoke to the wind and waves, "Peace! Be still." Immediately the wind and waves ceased. The disciples were relieved that the storm was over, but they were no longer afraid of the storm, they were afraid of Jesus, because He was able to stop the seemingly unstoppable power of the storms simply by speaking to it. They got just a glimpse of His power up close and cowered in fear.

In this section David keeps referring to the voice of the Lord. He says it is stronger than thunder, which can rattle our windows and our walls. He says the voice of the Lord shatters the cedars of Lebanon. Lebanon was known for its magnificent cedar trees.

Solomon's temple would be constructed from these majestic cedars. Even today Lebanon's flag has a picture of a cedar tree on it. The closest analog I can come up with for Americans is the redwood forests of California. David says that with a simple word from the Lord, he could turn these massive, magnificent trees that may have survived for a thousand years into toothpicks.

He uses the analogy of God being able to causes the mountains to skip like a young wild animal. It's an absurd picture, which is the point! If God tells a mountain to jump, the mountain would respond, "How high?" and leap into the air! The point is that God is so powerful that a simple word from Him can overpower the strongest things we can imagine.

But these statements also minimize the power of the false gods of the region. The Canaanites viewed the sea as a place of battle between their gods of Baal and Yam. They were caught in an epic struggle with one another. David points out that when God speaks the battle is over. The mountains David refers to (Mount Hermon and the mountains of Lebanon), were thought to be the home of their false gods, and David says the Lord could cause their strong fortress to skip around like a calf. This section's point is to show us the Lord's power, and to draw attention to the powerlessness of every other thing to which we might turn.

We may not worship wooden or golden idols today, but the same message still applies. When we put our faith in anything other than the Lord, it will fail in comparison. We are fools if we put more trust in anything than we do in God. And yet, we often do. We find confidence in our government (or the promise of a different one), our stock portfolio, our cleverness, our skills, or any number of other things. But God is more powerful than them all. Only a fool would trust these things more than the Lord.

Of course, verse 9 records the appropriate response to this recognition. While the world cowers in fear, those in the Lord's temple shout "Glory!" The appropriate response to recognizing the power of God is to worship Him.

If you struggle to worship the Lord, if you struggle to honor Him in the midst of a given circumstance or because of what He has done (or hasn't done), it's likely because you don't see Him clearly. Every time God's character is revealed in the Bible the response is the same—worship and a recognition that God has the ability to destroy you with a word. The only hope in that situation is to trust that God's grace will spare you. If we struggle to worship our Lord or fail to trust Him or are even angry with Him, I would suggest the reason is because our view of God is far too small.

The reason David points us to see the power of God is because that is the first step in proper worship. The voice of the Lord created the entirety of the cosmos! He spoke, and everything we see (and a whole bunch we can't see) came into existence! He speaks, and the storms cease. He speaks, and the world will rearrange itself. No power in all of creation can do this. No matter how powerful you think anything else is, it pales in comparison to our God. When we see Him fully, we will worship Him completely.

The Judgment of God

The last few verses of this psalm speak of the judgment of God, though that meaning may not be readily apparent.

¹⁰ The Lord rules over the floodwaters. The Lord reigns as king forever. ¹¹ The Lord gives his people strength. The Lord blesses them with peace. (Psalm 29:10-11, NLT)

When David speaks of the Lord ruling over the floodwaters, he is not merely speaking of a river overflowing its banks. The word here is unique, because it is only used in one other place in the Old Testament, in Genesis 6-9, the story of Noah. David is not saying that the Lord merely rules over the spring floods that come from rivers (though He does), but that the Lord was the One who ruled over the great flood that covered the earth and wiped out nearly every living thing.

The point of this statement is that God will ultimately judge His creation. He will not be mocked. Those who put their trust in false gods or other idols, whether those are Baal, Allah, or Buddah, or money, power, or popularity, will find themselves on the wrong end of the equation.

David says the Lord gives His people strength. He blesses them with peace. Notice that it is only His people who are given these things. Everyone else will see His power unleashed upon them. No matter what happens, we know God will be victorious.

This should not make us passive—we should work for godly changes in our world and seek to elect godly leaders, but our hope cannot be anchored to these things. When something not going our way shakes our faith, it's a sign that our faith was not in God but in our circumstances. David is trying to show us the futility of this approach. We must anchor our hope to the God who is greater than all. It is only then that we can find peace. We find peace not because there won't be storms, but because we know the One who is even more powerful than the storms. He is good, He loves us, and we can rest in Him, no matter what comes in our lives.

Conclusion

Hopefully, we can clearly see the greatness of our God in these verses. I'm not sure how you can come away from these verses and not believe that the Lord is more powerful than you can possibly imagine. But the big question, of course, is so what? Why does it matter that the Lord is more powerful than any other force we may encounter? I've got some suggestions.

First, it should lead to worship. This is the point David was making. When we see God's character fully, it leads to worship. Unfortunately, that word has become muddled in its meaning today. I often hear people speak of how they love the "worship" at certain churches. What they mean is the music. And we can absolutely worship the Lord in song! Songs that magnify the character of God are absolutely worshipful in nature. But it's also possible to feel an emotional connection to a time of singing but not have it be worshipful at all.

We have misunderstood what worship is about. It is not primarily about making us feel good. It is about bringing honor to the Lord. We lose sight of this when we simply make worship about singing songs we really enjoy. True worship is about honoring God as He deserves and about humbling ourselves before Him. So, yes, we can worship God through our singing (provided it is leading us to honor Him and humble ourselves), but don't forget that when we read His word, looking for Him to guide us, we are worshiping. When we come to Him in prayer, asking for His help, and asking Him to make us into who He wants us to be, we are worshiping. When we gather as believers and encourage each other to trust the Lord fully, we are worshiping. And when we submit our wills to His, we are worshiping. Worship is about acknowledging God's character and bowing before Him. When we properly understand who God is, it will lead us to worship Him fully. Worship is not just a time we enjoy on Sunday mornings; it should be the overall pattern of our lives.

Second, it should lead us to trust Him and find peace. Imagine, if you will, that you had to walk through the inner city, a crime-riddled place at night. You have to walk down a dark alley where you couldn't see what lay ahead or to your sides. How would you feel? I don't know about you, but I'd feel scared, even though I'm a pretty big guy. But how would you feel if you also had a team of Navy SEALs walking with you? I think I'd feel quite a bit more confident, because nothing that was lurking in the shadows could be scarier than these guys...and I was on their side. That's how we should view the world as Christians. Nothing we face is scarier than our God. This should lead us to radical obedience and a peace that makes absolutely no sense to the world around us. Rather than getting anxious or worrying about the crises facing us and our world, we should turn to our God in prayer, remembering He is more powerful than any situation we face. Rather than running after the latest fads put forth by the so-called experts, we trust what our Lord says, remembering that He knows better than anyone else and we want to be on His side. We can do these things because we know that God is in control, so we need not fear anything that can come against us. A proper view of God leads to a peace nothing in this world can rival.

Finally, it should drive us to submission. Many people imagine that God will not punish sin, that He will simply overlook all the ways we fail because He loves us. They imagine that because God hasn't destroyed humanity yet, He won't. Remember that the God who created all things is also the God who oversaw the flood, and He will come to the earth in judgment once more. We must order our lives according to His word. We must seek the forgiveness that He offers. He is our only hope, and we underestimate Him at our peril.

David's intention in this psalm is to remind us of the greatness of our God. It is easy for us to think of Him as basically like us. But as soon as we begin to look at His power and character objectively, we realize that isn't true. My hope today is that you will allow the heaviness of God's character to sit with you. Allow His character to weigh upon your heart. If you will do that, you will be driven to worship Him, honoring Him and submitting your will to His, which is exactly what He deserves.

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