

Sing for Joy!

Psalm 33

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Something that has become a beloved pastime in our culture in recent years is karaoke singing. People come to a place (often a bar) and enjoy letting out their inner rock star. They sing to backing tracks for famous songs. I'm often amazed at the gusto with which people sing, even those with seemingly no talent. This has led to the old joke that karaoke is actually the Japanese word for "tone-deaf". (It is actually a Japanese word that roughly translates to "empty orchestra")

But what I think is so fun about the karaoke atmosphere is people letting loose, really enjoying themselves, and expressing themselves through music (even if sometimes what happens at karaoke stretches the definition of music!) There are few places in our world where it is really acceptable to let our emotions go in that way.

David was a musician, and we see many instances in scripture of him giving full voice to his emotions about the greatness of his God. We don't know if David was the author of Psalm 33 (no author is given), but the instructions given here certainly seem consistent with David's attitude and practice.

As we work through Psalm 33 this morning, we'll see instructions for how we should praise God and why we should praise God. And in so doing, I hope to point us to some practical ways to make that a regular part of our lives.

Invitation to Praise

The psalmist begins our passage with an invitation (or command) to praise God.

¹ Let the godly sing for joy to the Lord; it is fitting for the pure to praise him.

² Praise the Lord with melodies on the lyre; make music for him on the ten-stringed harp. ³ Sing a new song of praise to him; play skillfully on the harp, and sing with joy. (Psalm 33:1-3, NLT)

We begin with the instruction to sing for joy to the Lord because it is fitting to praise Him. This phrase sing for joy doesn't really capture the meaning of what the psalmist is saying in these words though. The underlying words carry the meaning of shouting, an unbridled exclamation of praise! He is telling us that those who worship God should not restrain themselves in their exercise of praise.

Many modern churches focus on praise and worship as an integral part of their services. But I'm not convinced that what happens in American churches is necessarily what the author is telling us to do. As I look around in many churches (sometimes ours as well), I see some common themes. First is that many men do not sing at all. There are practical reasons for this. One is that many songs today are written for professional musicians, not for congregations. As such, the range required to sing those songs is challenging. As someone tasked with leading the singing, I can attest that it's

sometimes a real stretch to hit the notes. Most men aren't interested in looking foolish as they try to sing.

Another is that men are generally taught to restrain their emotions. From a young age, men are told not to show emotion, because it's a sign of weakness. Women tend to be more readily willing to express emotion in worship, and as I look around in churches, I see more women than men participating in the praise and worship time.

A third reason is that people don't know the songs. Sometimes the songs we sing are unfamiliar, so people can't praise God because they're too focused on trying to figure out how the melody goes. Other times, the songs express concepts or emotions that simply don't resonate with those singing them.

And finally, I think we often make our praise and worship times into more of a performance than inviting participation. There is a school of thought that says that loud music, bright lights, and an otherwise dim room enables people to let themselves go in worship more freely, but I think sometimes it leads us to take in these experiences much like a concert. And a good concert can give you an emotional experience that has nothing to do with who God is. The same can happen in a church. Here's a principle to keep in mind: if it's the music and not the Savior that's moving our hearts, then it is not genuine praise.

The writer gives us some examples of what genuine praise looks like. He says to praise God in music, with melodies on the instruments of the day, the lyre and the harp. He says to play these instruments skillfully before the Lord. Praise to God shouldn't be mindless or boring. We should engage all our faculties in finding creative ways to honor our Lord. Some churches insist that the use of instruments in worship is sinful. I don't see how you reach that conclusion after reading psalms like this. Yes, we can drift into worldly patterns with our music (and adding instruments may make it easier for this to happen), but using instruments certainly is not sinful in and of itself.

He also says to sing a new song to the Lord. Some have taken this to mean that older songs no longer have value. I don't think that's true either. But each generation will find new ways to express their praise to the Lord. That is not a bad thing. We should welcome new ways of honoring our God, while always being careful that the goal and aim of these new things is to honor the Lord, not keeping up with the trends, making ourselves feel better, or anything else.

Praise His Character

The rest of the psalm delves into the reasons we should praise the Lord.

⁴ For the word of the Lord holds true, and we can trust everything he does. ⁵ He loves whatever is just and good; the unfailing love of the Lord fills the earth.
(Psalm 33:4-5, NLT)

The psalmist points us to the reason we should shout joyfully before the Lord. It is not because we are moved by fancy music or well-choreographed shows, but because the character of our God is worthy of praise!

He says the word of the Lord holds true and we can trust everything He does. We should praise God because we have seen Him keep His promises over and over! He has shown Himself to be worth trusting and He has continually proven that He will do what He says. God's word has been attacked continually over millennia, yet it continues to show itself true. As we see God's promises in scripture and remember His track record of faithfulness, it should naturally cause us to praise Him!

The other characteristic the psalmist points us to is that God loves what is just and good and His unfailing love fills the earth. I love that these traits are all tied together in one phrase. The psalmist says God's justice, goodness, and love are all worthy of praise.

Many imagine that God's love and His justice are incompatible. On the contrary, genuine love demands justice. The problem we have with God's justice is that it rightly puts us in a place of judgment before Him. But we also see that God is good and full of unfailing love. The fact that God's love is unfailing is important. It is a reminder that no matter what happens in this life, no matter what we do, no matter how circumstances change, God's love remains the same. This is tremendous news for the believer! And the psalmist rightly points us to the fact that when we understand God's character, it should lead us to praise Him!

Praise Him as Creator

The next characteristics the psalmist points us to is the fact that God's power is revealed in His creation.

⁶ The Lord merely spoke, and the heavens were created. He breathed the word, and all the stars were born. ⁷ He assigned the sea its boundaries and locked the oceans in vast reservoirs. ⁸ Let the whole world fear the Lord, and let everyone stand in awe of him. ⁹ For when he spoke, the world began! It appeared at his command. (Psalm 33:6-9, NLT)

It is easy to read these words and miss the magnificence of what is being declared. The psalmist is telling us that the Lord spoke, and the entirety of the universe was created. Stars, planets, nebulae, and galaxies all appeared with a simple word from God.

We like to imagine ourselves as pretty advanced in our scientific endeavors and our understanding of how the world works. But what we can do with our modern scientific abilities pales in comparison to God.

Some of you may remember that we didn't always have seedless watermelons. All of my childhood, eating watermelon meant spitting out the black seeds and the white seeds. To this day, I can still feel the texture of those two different seeds in my mouth. And then one day, we suddenly had seedless watermelons. This was a result of years of creating hybrids that would not have seeds, but would still be as delicious as ever. It

was a years-long push to get to the point where it was a viable crop that would take over the market. Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful for seedless watermelon, but if God had to spend the same amount of time as scientists for such revolutionary breakthroughs as removing seeds from a watermelon, the universe would still be under construction!

God, however, did not need years of research in a lab. He did not need an R&D team. He did not even need a chemistry set. God created the universe out of nothing! He spoke, and the entire world snapped into existence. This is so far outside of our experience that we struggle to wrap our heads around it. Our God is so much greater than we can possibly grasp.

The psalmist attempts to help us see this by pointing to the most uncontrollable things we see in the world and reminding us that God controls them. God is in control of the oceans and the seas. As we look at these and are overwhelmed by their power, we should similarly be overwhelmed that our God is in control of every molecule contained within them!

I have sometimes heard the size of the universe as an argument disproving the existence of God. They say that if God created the universe as a home for humans, it is vastly oversized. And I would agree with that statement. We cannot grasp the vastness of our universe. We have barely managed to explore our own solar system, let alone beyond it. But I would contend that the universe was not created as a home for humanity, but as a canvas to showcase God's greatness and power! An infinite universe seems a fitting way to point to an infinite God. As you look into the night sky and see thousands of stars (knowing there are billions more you cannot see with the naked eye) realizing that our sun is just one of those stars, and yet our solar system is larger than we can grasp...it should remind us of the greatness of our God. And it should lead us to praise Him.

Praise Him for His Control

The psalmist continues, pointing us to the fact that God is in control over all things, even the most powerful kings of the earth.

¹⁰ The Lord frustrates the plans of the nations and thwarts all their schemes.

¹¹ But the Lord's plans stand firm forever; his intentions can never be shaken.

¹² What joy for the nation whose God is the Lord, whose people he has chosen as his inheritance. ¹³ The Lord looks down from heaven and sees the whole human race. ¹⁴ From his throne he observes all who live on the earth. ¹⁵ He made their hearts, so he understands everything they do. ¹⁶ The best-equipped army cannot save a king, nor is great strength enough to save a warrior. ¹⁷ Don't count on your warhorse to give you victory—for all its strength, it cannot save you.

¹⁸ But the Lord watches over those who fear him, those who rely on his unfailing love. ¹⁹ He rescues them from death and keeps them alive in times of famine.

(Psalm 33:10-19, NLT)

These verses compare our God to the kings of the earth. We often speak of the United States as the most powerful nation on earth and of the President as the most powerful man on the planet. We say this because generally speaking, it is true. Our military power and influence in the world is greater than that of any other nation on earth today.

And yet, we are often reminded that we cannot control everything. We see terror attacks that are evil. We cannot stop some of the injustices being carried out around the world. We are often caught between difficult diplomatic, moral, and economic realities that limit our ability to bring about our will. But this is not the case with the Lord.

The psalmist points out that God is more powerful than even the most powerful nations on earth. He knows the hearts of every human being, because after all, He created them. Nothing is hidden from the Lord. The combined forces of the NSA, CIA, and FBI are nothing compared to the intelligence of our God.

The psalmist reminds us that only a fool would place his trust in men as opposed to the Lord. He says that the best-equipped army cannot save a king if the Lord has chosen to topple the kingdom. He exclaims, “what joy for the nation whose God is the Lord, whose people He has chosen as His inheritance.” This was speaking specifically about the nation of Israel, but the general principle holds true. Those who align themselves with the Lord will be victorious. A nation who stands with God will be safe. This does not guarantee freedom from economic or military hardships but points us to the ultimate outcome. The Lord will be victorious. We should align our hearts (and our lives) with Him. He is sovereign over all things, and worthy of our praise.

Return to His Character

As the psalmist concludes, he returns to the same place he started,

²⁰ We put our hope in the Lord. He is our help and our shield. ²¹ In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. ²² Let your unfailing love surround us, Lord, for our hope is in you alone. (Psalm 33:20-22, NLT)

The psalmist reminds us that praise is not merely about what is happening on the outside, it's a reflection of what is happening on the inside. He points to all the characteristics of God he has mentioned and says that the godly put their hope in the Lord. We rejoice because we trust Him. He alone is the source of our hope.

My hope is that you can work toward being able to say these things truthfully in your own life. My prayer is that you will place all your hope in God, and not in the things of the world. And as you trust Him more fully, the psalmist rightly points out that you will also praise Him more joyfully.

Conclusion

This whole psalm is about praising God, but what are we supposed to do with it? How do we learn to praise God in the ways this psalm holds out to us? I've got some suggestions. **First, we must reflect on the character of our God.** Real praise is borne not out of emotional fervor, but of an understanding of the greatness of our God. If you

struggle to praise the Lord, I contend it's because you don't really understand His greatness. So take time to reflect on these characteristics revealed in this passage. Look at the night sky or the created order around you and remember that God created these things with a word. Look at a newborn child and remark at how God created human beings with the capacity to create life in a way we still don't fully understand. A child grows from a single cell to having hands, feet, eyes, heart, skin, blood vessels, and they all work together! Only a God as great as ours can do this! Allow those truths to fill you up, so you can praise Him for who He is.

Second, surround yourself with things that reinforce this attitude. There is great value in Christian music and in Christian teaching that drives us to praise the Lord for who He is. But you must be discerning about the things you consume. Music can make us feel good but not actually be extolling God's character. Many songs played on the radio (and in churches) rely on repetitive phrases (that do not have much meaning), significant musical swells, and majestic key changes to evoke emotions. These are not inherently bad things, but we should make sure our praise is driven by the character of God and not the cleverness of the arrangement. Similarly, we should surround ourselves with teaching that elevates our view of God, not our view of self.

Third, practice giving expression to your emotions before God. Our church is not particularly expressive. And that's ok. Genuine worship does not have to result in shouting, crying, or dancing. But sometimes it should! When God answers a prayer in your life, let yourself do a dance of praise! When you are overwhelmed by His greatness, pause and lift your hands to heaven, or allow the tears to flow. When you hear God's word preached and you hear a truth that moves you deeply, say amen or something to that effect. When you are overwhelmed by the truths in a song, sit down and quietly thank God for who He is. We are often more concerned about what we think is proper decorum than we are about allowing ourselves to express praise to God. Emotions are not a bad thing, provided they are directed toward our God.

If you feel like raising your hands in worship or saying amen during the sermon, or moving around while singing, or being still and praising God, do so! That's what Psalm 33 is teaching us to do. These things are good and proper, provided they are about honoring our God and not about drawing attention to ourselves.

I'm amazed sometimes when I see the emotion on display by a group cutting loose singing karaoke or at a ballgame during the 7th inning stretch or during the national anthem. I'm similarly amazed when I see a group of people who are supposedly gathered to praise the God of all the universe, and they stand silently, emotionless, and sometimes I even question if they have a pulse. My friends, this psalm reminds us that God has given us emotions. He has called us to praise Him. And sometimes letting loose as we reflect on who He is is exactly the appropriate response.

As you go into this week, my hope is that you'll allow God's character to fill you up more than you would your favorite karaoke song. He is far greater, and He deserves our praise. So let loose before Him! He deserves it.

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