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Psalm 65
To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David. A Song
(RSV)

Introduction to Psalm 65

From verses 9-13 we may plausibly conjecture that this Psalm was originally composed in thanksgiving for an abundant harvest. This abundant harvest is here understood to be another, perhaps the latest, in a series of manifestations of the powerful goodness of God (verses 5-8). We may further conjecture that the harvest was a double blessing: not only was it abundant, but it came as an answer to an earlier prayer during a crop failure or a drought. The drought was understood as a punishment for sins (verse 3), during which the Psalmist made unspecified vows to God in exchange, or in thanksgiving, for His rescuing mercy (verses 1-2). Thereafter the Psalm presumably became a standard feature of harvest festivals and a general thanksgiving for the wideness of God's mercy. Thus there are three parts to this Psalm:

Verses 1-4 -- praise God who hears prayer and forgives sins.
Verses 5-8 -- bless God who powerfully answers our prayer in wondrous ways.
Verses 9-13 -- praise God for abundant rain and a plentiful harvest.

Vv. 1-4

**¹ Praise is due to thee,
O God, in Zion;
and to thee shall vows be performed,
^{2a} O thou who hearest prayer!**

The praise of God is here spoken of as a duty. Perhaps such an obligation was part of the vow which the Psalmist had made, and vows must be kept. More generally, praise is an essential component of the believer's response to God. Recall Luther's instruction in the explanation to the First Article of the Creed: For all God's blessings it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. Or again in his explanation of the First Petition of the Lord's Prayer: We are to use the name of God to pray, praise, and give thanks. Praise and thanksgiving belong to what may be called the believer's joyful duty.

The praise of which David here speaks is public worship, that which is done in Zion (in Jerusalem), and in the days after David in the Temple; these are the places where God has promised to be available to receive our praise. Our New Testament counterpart is the public worship of God (going to church) as our joyful duty, for God has promised to be present for us in Bread and Wine. Our duty to praise God balances the one-dimensional motivation for worship so often adduced by those who say they don't like going to church because they don't get anything out of it.

God is here praised as the One who hears prayer. Idols have no ears; they can neither hear, nor are they capable of answering prayer. It is different with the God of Zion.

2b To thee shall all flesh come

3 on account of sins.

**When our transgressions prevail over (defeat) us,
thou dost forgive them.**

In the Psalms, the phrase "to come to God" generally means to come to the House of God, to the Tabernacle, or to the Temple. This meaning is here encouraged by verse 4. To this day when people want to have a special sense of the presence of God (as distinguished from the generalized sense that God is available everywhere), they often come to a church or to a chapel.

The occasion for coming to God as specified in verse 3 is the sense of having sinned, of having transgressed the commandments. Perhaps originally that sense arose out of a crop failure or a drought. Note that the acknowledgement of sin is communal; it is "our transgressions" that are here confessed. But the words are applicable also in a variety of settings.

The Psalm says that "all flesh," that is, all humanity, and not only Israel, needs to come to the God of Zion, who alone can deal effectively with sins and transgressions. This expression might be taken to mean that, as all people must, indeed shall come to you, O God of Zion, for forgiveness, so we Israelites in this instance do so now. It might also be read within the confines of Israel: everyone in Israel must come to you, because our collective transgressions have gotten the better of us, and so all of us now pray for forgiveness.

God is here praised as the God who forgives sins. The image in the word translated as "forgive" is to "cover" or to "wipe off." Sin is here thought of as a blot or a stain, which strains the fellowship between God and us. God alone can remove, or cover up, or wash away, the offending human sin, and thereby restore harmonious fellowship. Notice that the target of forgiveness is not so much the person as it is the offending sins and transgressions (plural).

**4a Blessed is he (the person) whom thou dost choose and bring near,
to dwell in thy courts!**

**4b We shall be satisfied with the goodness of thy house,
thy holy temple!**

It is possible to understand verse 4a as a benediction upon those who are chosen to be priests in the Temple, and who lived in the Temple area when they were on duty. Their blessing is that they live in so glorious a place. On the other hand we, the lay-people, are content to be the beneficiaries of the goodness of the Lord's house, without actually dwelling there. However, it is perhaps better to think of verse 4a stating an axiom, and verse 4b anticipating the communal appropriation of the promise of that axiom. Thus, when God wipes away a person's sins (verse 4a thinks here of each individual), He once more makes that person a Chosen One. When God chooses us, He brings us near to Himself again, that is, to dwell in His courts, His house, His holy temple. When then all of us (verse 4b is in the plural) receive the blessing of such a re-instating re-election, we may anticipate that in such closeness to God we shall be satisfied with the goodness of God's house.

In English "to be satisfied" can mean the minimum: you owe me \$100.00, but because I do not expect to see it again, I will be satisfied with a \$50.00 repayment. The original of the Psalm intends just the opposite; it wants to express fullness: you owe me \$100.00, but you repay me

double (\$200.00)! Thus the Psalmist is anticipating the abundance of an overflowing goodness that comes from dwelling in God's House.

The repeated emphasis on the Temple renders somewhat problematic the traditional ascription of authorship of this Psalm to David. Though he indeed wanted to build a temple, it was in fact built after his death by his son Solomon.

Vv. 5-8

**^{5a} By dread (awe-inspiring) deeds thou dost answer us with deliverance,
O God of our salvation,**

"Deliverance" and "salvation" are parallel terms. The deliverance here is from the blot of sins and from the danger of famine; these are also the content of salvation. God saves us from everything that imperils our life, whether that be the spiritual threat from sins, or whether that be the physical threat of drought. Here as elsewhere the Old Testament keeps us Christians from restricting the notion of a comprehensive salvation. The promise of the Kingdom of God is that there awaits us a resurrection of the body; we shall no longer sin, and we shall also no longer hunger or thirst.

Now in three relative clauses God and His salvation are further described and praised.

**^{5b} who art the hope of all the ends of the earth,
and of the farthest seas;**

The deliverance and salvation that Israel experiences and expects is the hope that even the most remote peoples (like we Gentile Christians) may dare to hope for.

**⁶ who by thy strength hast established the mountains,
being girded with might (armed with power);**

Since God is armed with power equal to the task, He was able to create the mountains. This is a frequent poetic device for speaking of God's creating might.

**⁷ who dost still the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves,
the tumult (riot, rebellion) of the peoples;**

For Israel the roaring of the seas and of the waves symbolize the chaos and disorder that continually threaten the universe which God brings into being, just as rebellious nations bring chaos into that peaceful social harmony which God designed.

We may confidently appeal to God for deliverance and salvation, because He is equal to the task. He has demonstrated that in the past, he has the power as the Creator, and He is capable of restoring peace and harmony to the disorder introduced by all manner of chaotic forces.

**^{8a} so that those who dwell at earth's farthest bounds
are afraid (stand in awe) at thy signs;
^{8b} thou makest the outgoings (outer limits) of the morning (east)
and the evening (west) to shout for joy.**

People everywhere should see in God's dread deeds (verse 5) a sign both of His power and goodness, His power to save. Most directly, we too may be encouraged to entrust ourselves to this God of power and pity.

Vv. 9-13

- ⁹ Thou visitest the earth and waterest it,
thou greatly enrichest it;
the river of God** (the heavenly source for water on earth) **is full of water;
thou providest their grain,
for so thou hast prepared it.**
- ¹⁰ Thou waterest its furrows** (created in the earth by the plow) **abundantly,
settling** (levelling) **its ridges** (the mounds between the furrows),
softening it (the hard earth) **with showers,
and blessing its growth.**
- ¹¹ Thou crownest the** (agricultural) **year with thy bounty** (a rich harvest);
the tracks of thy chariot drip with fatness (abundance).

God's chariot is an image for the rain clouds (see also Psalm 68:4), which are here hailed as saturated with an abundance of life-giving water. LBW #548, stanza 2 and LW #458, stanza 2 pick up the imagery of clouds as God's chariot, but misapplies the meaning of the Psalm by speaking of God's "chariots of wrath."

- ¹² The pastures of the wilderness drip,
the hills gird** (dress) **themselves with joy,
¹³ the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.**

The lush pastures and meadows are covered with flocks, and especially with an abundance of newborn lambs and kids. The verdant hills and the meadows and the valleys join in a joyful hymn of praise to God. "The hills are alive with the sound of music!"

The LBW prayer to accompany Psalm 65:

Lord God, joy marks your presence; beauty, abundance, and peace are the tokens of your work in all creation. Work also in our lives, that by these signs we may see the splendor of your love and may praise you through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A further reflection:

The first verse of this Psalm speaks of the Psalmist's vows. Even though vows were not commanded in the Mosaic Law, the Bible, especially the Psalter, is full of vows. Vows seem to be a general feature of human religiosity. A vow differs from an aspiration or an intention or even a resolution in that a vow is a definite promise made to God, by which a person binds him/herself to do or not to do something, sometimes perhaps to win God's favor, sometimes as an expression of thanksgiving to God for a blessing already received. The Reformation took a dim view of vows, principally because they lent themselves so readily to work-righteousness. A vow could easily be understood as doing a duty above and beyond the call of the commandments and thus earning additional merit before God. As a result, we Lutherans have only a little experience with the piety of vows.

And yet we have ritualized certain kinds of public vows. I think of our liturgical practice asking baptismal sponsors to make a vow to care for their baptismal charge, of making confirmation vows of faithfulness to God before the congregation, and exchanging wedding vows at a marriage. In these cases we promise God that we will fulfill our obligations: to our god-child, to our fellow members in the Body of Christ, to our spouse. We might perhaps use these as a model for reconsidering, in addition, the wider Biblical practice of vows to include also personal vows. The Reformation and the Lutheran Confessions, while abhorring the sacrifice of the Mass, did teach us to distinguish between sacrifices thought to be meritorious (obviously evil) and sacrifices of thanksgiving (capable of good). In a similar way we could distinguish between vows made in the hope of gaining a benefit from God (easily abused), and vows made in gratitude for blessings received (more obviously good). What good things might not happen, for example, if in response to an unexpected raise in pay we would develop the habit of promising God to set aside a good percentage of that raise for the support of a needy fellow-Christian? Perhaps we really do make vows, only we have learned to call them pledges!

Nugget

"The Psalm gives us language to celebrate our dependence upon the good earth and its produce in a poetic and personal way. It transcends our growing habit of speaking of productivity in a technological fashion and allows us to speak to the one upon whose gift of a fertile earth all our science and economies depend. That all together is thanksgiving as it should be."

James Luther Mays

Walter E. Keller

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