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Psalm 111

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Psalm 111

This is a Psalm of thanksgiving and praise. It is impossible to say when it was written, although some scholars think it dates from a time after the return from Exile in Babylon. It is an acrostic poem; each of its 22 lines begins with the next letter in the 22-letter Hebrew alphabet.

Praise the LORD!

This acclamation of praise is a kind of title for the Psalm; it is not a part of the acrostic structure, which in the original Hebrew begins with verse 1.

V. 1

**¹ I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, (that is to say,) in the congregation.**

This is a Psalm of the grateful heart. But the thanks of which the Psalmist speaks is not simply a grateful feeling in the heart, it is the public thanksgiving which expresses itself in worship with the assembled People of God. The gathered assembly is the congregation, here called the company of the upright, that is, those who are righteous. When we who are the People of God are called "the righteous," it is important to understand in what sense we may be called "the righteous." We obviously are not righteous in the sense that we are morally superior to other people. But we are called the righteous for two reasons: 1) The Israelites initially, and Christians subsequently, have been called by God to become righteous; that is our destiny under God; and 2) Under the terms of that call, God places us in His training program and disciplines us by His Holy Spirit in the way of righteousness. Therefore we shall some day be righteous, even as He is righteous. That seems to be the basic point of this Psalm.

V. 2

**² Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.**

The "works of the LORD" may refer either to the works of the creation in which all people are the beneficiaries, or to those that He does on behalf of His People more specifically. And while it is laudable to praise God for his wonderful works of creation, I think that in this Psalm the reference is to those works which God does on behalf of His People, paradigmatically, the work by which he rescued them from Egypt. If this Psalm was written after the Exile, as some scholars think, then His works would include also the "second exodus" from Babylon. But, while these great events are formative for Israel's faith, the believer will also become increasingly aware of the full range of the LORD's merciful works on our behalf. Christians who pray this Psalm will also have to think of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ for us and for our salvation, and particularly of his atoning death for us, and of his resurrection for us, when he also imparts to us his Holy Spirit. There is a record of the wonderful works of God in the Bible, and these are studied by all who delight in them. And their delight will only multiply as they continue to meditate upon them.

V. 3

**³ Full of honor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.**

The works of God reveal his honor and majesty. God initiated His works with the promises he made to Adam and Eve, to Noah, to Abraham, to mention only a few of the basic ones. When therefore He fulfills His promises, we may see God's honor at work. He will not make promises in vain; it is His honor to do what He has promised. That is what is on display in the Exodus from Egypt, in the "second exodus" from Babylon, in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Simultaneously the majesty of the power of God is also on display. Not the Pharaoh, not Babylon, not even the grave are powerful enough to keep Him from His promised course. That makes these divine deeds so right, so righteous. This righteousness of the LORD is everlasting. He can be expected to continue such compassionate power on into eternity, and therefore in its consequences for us His powerful compassion is also everlasting.

V. 4

**⁴ He has caused his wonderful works to be remembered;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.**

In the Old Testament the LORD caused his wonderful deeds to be remembered by instituting festivals, in which His grace and mercy were commemorated. Again, paradigmatic here is the Passover festival, the Seder, in which Israel recalled the great rescue from Egypt. In a similar way we Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper, ideally every week, doing so *inter alia* in remembrance of his death for us. We also observe festivals, great and small, such as Christmas and Easter and Pentecost, or saints days and lesser observances. Their purpose is always to call to mind that the LORD is gracious and merciful.

V. 5

**⁵ He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.**

The basic covenant formula is, "I will be your God, and you shall be My People." People may forget this covenant; God will always be mindful of His covenant. The reference to supplying food is first of all to God's provision of manna and quail when Israel was hungering in the wilderness. It is here understood as the sign that God will always provide for His own People. Look, for example, to Psalm 145:15-16.

V. 6

**⁶ He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage (territory) of the nations.**

God has shown His power by leading His People in the conquest of the land of Canaan. This conquest of the nations is a sign. It is the sign that in the End all the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ (Messiah), and He shall reign forever and ever (Revelation 11:15).

V. 7

**⁷ The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.**

What the LORD does, and what the LORD commands, form a unity. What He does in faithfulness and in justice spills over into what He commands, which are the extension of His faithfulness and justice. They are as dependable as He, the Lawgiver, is dependable.

V. 8

**⁸ They are established forever and ever,
to be performed (by the righteous congregation) with faithfulness
and uprightness.**

What the LORD does and what He commands are ordained to last forever. Therefore, those whom He has called to be His People, who are called to be His righteous congregation, are hereby exhorted to perform them. We who are members of the righteous congregation are commanded to be reflections of the faithfulness and the righteousness and the trustworthiness of the LORD.

This is an important insight. God is the Creator of the world, and that is the same God who shows Himself as the redeeming LORD to Israel. His laws are of a piece with the way He created the world. So when He calls old Israel and now New Israel to be His own, He is calling them to be the kind of community He had designed in the creation, a design that – alas! – has been frustrated by the fall into sin. And when He gives His People commandments, as He does when He issues His Ten Commandments, these are not arbitrary commandments. They describe a life and a life-style for which He had designed us in the first place. He commands us to have no other gods before or beside Him, not only because there really are no other gods available (despite our repeated ingenuity at creating gods in our own image), but also because He designed us to be a People with only Him as their God.

Therefore it is only right that God, in His compassion for us, should remake us once more in His own image, as we were designed originally, however much we might object, and however painful such a rehabilitation might prove to be. That is the righteousness of God, a righteousness of which we are the beneficiaries.

V. 9

**⁹ He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant (to endure) forever.
Holy and awesome (producing fear) is his name.**

The redemption of God's People here refers to the deliverance from Egypt. The covenant, "I will be their God and they shall be my People" will never be revoked to all eternity. On these two events God stakes His Name and Reputation. God is never more truly the God He wants to be, and to be known as, than when He is redeeming His People and re-molding them into His own in the covenant bond.

V. 10

**¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it (better in NIV, them) have a good
understanding.
His praise endures forever.**

Verse 10 ties into verse 9; the Name of God is awesome, a word in Hebrew which could just as well be translated “fearsome,” because it is the same root as the noun “fear” in this verse. Hence I suggested that the meaning of awesome is “producing fear.” The sense is that the contemplation of the redemption and the covenant of Yahweh will produce fear, and when we thus fear the LORD we are well on the way to becoming genuinely wise.

There are two important points here:

1) We often hear it said that the fear of the Lord does not mean that you should be afraid of Him. That is a half-truth. There is indeed to be an element of high and holy reverent fear in our attitude toward God. When Isaiah saw the LORD in His Temple in Isaiah 6, he spontaneously cried out, “Woe is me!” There was no point in telling Isaiah that he need not be afraid of Yahweh! So when Luther says that we should fear God above all things, we are bidden to recognize that it is after all God whom we creatures have to deal with. And there *ought* to be, because in the End there indeed *will* be some knee-knocking trembling going on in the meeting with God. There is, of course, more than craven fear to cultivate. This high and holy God effected a powerful redemption for us and enters into a covenant in which He promises to be *our* God and gives us the gift of graciously letting us be his People.

2) Wisdom does not come from contemplation alone. The Psalm says that a good understanding comes from practicing the precepts of the LORD (see verses 7-8). There is wonderful Collect from the *Order for Morning Worship Without Communion* of The Lutheran Hymnal (retained in LW, p. 156) in which we pray, “Grant we beseech Thee, Almighty God, unto Thy Church Thy Holy Spirit and the wisdom which cometh down from above, ...” This is the wisdom of which this Psalm is speaking. That wisdom begins with fearing the LORD and observing His Law (law, testimonies, precepts, commandments, ordinances, statutes, word, ways, and promise). Be serious about these, the Creeds and the Lord’s Prayer, and all the rest will begin to open up with glorious clarity and praiseworthy faith. The prayer from the LBW therefore wonderfully asks for the GIFT of obedience.

The Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 111:

Merciful and gentle Lord, the crowning glory of all the saints, give us, your children, the gift of obedience, which is the beginning of wisdom, so that we may be filled with your mercy and that what you command we may do by the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Nugget

All mankind is of one author and is one volume. When one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated. God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice. But God's hand is in every translation, and His hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another.

John Donne, as quoted by Carol Iannone in *First Things*, February 2000

Walter E. Keller

January 30, 2000 – **The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany**