

HOLY SILENCE, SHOUTS OF JOY

SERIES: PATTERNS FOR PRAYER

by Steve Zeisler

Having just been on our annual men's retreat, I was reminded of how helpful it is at times to be on retreat, to get away from our ordinary circumstances. Too often we are caught in the daily routineness of life. Our study series this winter has been on the subject of prayer.

Prayer has exactly the same quality about it, doesn't it? What retreats do over an extended period of time, prayer does every moment that we engage in it. It takes us away from letting this world's thoughts and attitudes dominate us, and it turns us toward the face of God so that we behold him -- not just think about him -- and are thereby encouraged. We want to continue learning what the Scriptures have to teach us about the nature of prayer, so I would ask you to turn to Psalm 65 this morning.

We've been studying the Psalms as the prayer book of the Bible. Let me suggest to you what is distinctive about this psalm in our series. We have looked at psalms previously that have as their starting point the human condition, some struggle or question that is on the heart of the psalmist. The man in prayer (David in each case so far) raises the question to begin with and finally turns to God for answers or turns to God in reflection, and pours out his struggle, or is challenged by a vision of the Lord. But the starting point is always the human condition.

Psalm 65, however, while clearly making reference to all kinds of things on earth and to human experiences, is not a prayer about anything specific. Remember in Psalm 8, David said, "When I consider your heavens...what is man that you are mindful of him?" He was asking questions about his own selfworth and his own place in the universe. Psalms 12 and 13 asked for help amidst difficult times: "How long will you hide your face from me [before you meet my need]?" Psalm 36 examined the role of the evil man in his vile thoughts and wicked actions, and having done so was led to a vision of the glory of God.

Focus on God

But this psalm does not start out with any of those specifics. The psalmist is reviewing the character of God himself. "You are a God who is concerned about human beings; you save and care for us. That is who you are. You are a God who is concerned about the history of the race on this planet. You are a God who is concerned about the creation and its needs." David is reviewing in conversation with the Lord the Lord's greatness, just for his sake, not because he has some specific requirement for prayer at the moment. It's an important lesson for us to learn; there are times when we should speak to God of his glory, review what he does in caring for men in this world, and praise him in specifics for who he is and what he does without anything first eliciting the prayer other than God's own greatness.

It's a bit like human lovers who have grown together over a long time, whose marriage is mature, like wine that is aged. Mature lovers don't speak to one another and appreciate one another just at times that the calendar calls for: "It's Valentine's Day" . . . "it's our anniversary" . . . "it's her birthday," where some external thing lays a duty on them to express their appreciation. They will have moved beyond subtle manipulation when we speak lovely things to one another because we have an agenda; we're trying to get something. But in the most mature love, appreciation is expressed without anything bringing it forward other than a sense of captivation by the one beloved.

A life that is still and appreciative is itself a form of praise to God

Psalm 65.

For the director of music. A psalm of David. A song.

**Praise awaits you, O God, in Zion; to you our vows will be fulfilled.
O you who hear prayer, to you all men will come.
When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions.
Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts!
We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple.**

**You answer us with awesome deeds of righteousness, O God our Savior, the hope of all
the ends of**

**the earth and of the farthest seas, who formed the mountains by your power, having
armed yourself with**

**strength, who stilled the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the turmoil
of the nations.**

**Those living far away fear your wonders;
where morning dawns and evening fades you call forth songs of joy.**

**You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are
filled with water to provide the people with grain,
for so you have ordained it.**

**You drench its furrows and level its ridges; you soften it with showers and bless its
crops.**

You crown the year with your bounty, and your carts overflow with abundance.

The grasslands of the desert overflow; the hills are clothed with gladness.

**The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with grain; they shout
for joy and sing.**

Three arenas of praise

This psalm has three sections with points of demarcation we can easily observe. Verses 1 through 4 are the first section, verses 5 through 8 the second section, and verses 9 through 13 the third. Each succeeding section builds on the previous one. In the first section David deals with individuals and their relationship with God. He's thinking here of how God cares for and ministers to ordinary people like us. There is a great deal in that to praise God about. For example, he is the God who hears prayers. The second section concerns what God does with human history. It grows from the first and is an expansion of it. How does God deal with nations and history -- the great events on the world scale? Then the third section focuses on God's dealings with nature.

The order of these things is the order of salvation. We see it described throughout the Bible. The Lord first deals with individuals. In saving us from Adam's rebellion, our Lord first comes and wins men and women one by one to himself. He woos them into relationship with him, and they become his children. And then, as we know, the next step in salvation will be to have human history come under the rule of God so that all that is wicked will be done away with in history, and the nations of the earth will worship the Lord. There's a kingdom coming on earth in which things will be set right. Lastly, the creation will be given back its right relationship to God under a human race that is what it ought to be, proper stewards of the earth. The creation will be redeemed. so we're going from smaller to larger. David is moving along the course of salvation history as he proceeds through this psalm.

One last general observation is that each of these three sections ends with a note of joy. The end of verse 4 says, "We are filled with the good things of your house . . ." The word "filled" could be translated "fulfilled." We are content, at peace. Peace, contentment, and fulfillment all are the close cousins of joy. The second

section ends with the observation, ". . . where morning dawns and evening fades you call forth songs of joy," And the third section ends, ". . . the valleys are mantled with grain; they shout for joy and sing." So this psalm, in which David is praising God and giving the credit that is due him, describing his greatness in these three spheres, always ends up with the observation that this is very good. This is joyfilled and delightful to say. The mature prayer that we are reading here, the observation of God for himself in his beauty, is always going to lead to an expression of joy.

Quiet praise

Let me consider these three sections in order. The first phrase of verse 1 is a little difficult translate. The NIV, which we just read, says, "Praise awaits you, O God, in Zion." What it literally says is, "Praise is stillness," or, "Praise is silence." We might think the idea there is that praise is sitting quietly waiting for God, anticipating him, wanting to speak up but unable to, holding its breath. But that's not the idea. It's more the silence or stillness of one who is deeply content, for whom all the anxieties have been resolved. A life that is still and appreciative is itself a form of praise to God. Praise doesn't always have to be outspoken and exuberant. That's really the point he's making to begin with. The first section begins with stillness; the ovation will grow louder as we go along (e.g. v.5).

Throughout these first four verses, we see couplets of ideas linked together. In verse 1 we see the first: a praise of quiet contentment, and its attendant idea that God is one to whom vows will be fulfilled. The second couplet of ideas is that we serve a God who hears prayer, and therefore all kinds of people will come to him in prayer. The third is that we were overwhelmed by sins once, and God is the God who forgives sins. And fourthly, he notes that God chooses his own, and then draws them into intimacy, with himself.

The importance of vows

Let's consider these a moment. Of the things he wants to say about God's dealing with individuals like us, why is fulfillment of vows the first one? In some ways it seems to have less claim than some of the others. We might list forgiveness of sins first, or the willingness of God to hear prayers. The concept of vows is an interesting one, if you stop to think of it. We make vows at moments of serious intent in our life. If we make vows to God and we genuinely fear God, we will fulfill the vows we make. Such vows give us the strength to say no to temptations and to the baser notions in us. A vow made to God anticipates action, and the action will be valuable and worthwhile, perhaps heroic. It calls forth courage in order to succeed because we have stated before God what we ought to be; what he's calling us to be.

Patrick Arnold has written an essay called, "In Search of the Hero," and he makes an interesting observation: "Christianity" is beginning to produce a generation of men with no wildness or fight in them, a blow-dried, Gucci-shoed, and sun-tanned lot whose primary moral achievement is being nice." Vows made to God about things that are important, vows kept in his name, are not going to produce moral achievement only as great as being nice. They are going to evoke greater things in us.

Two shows captured my attention on television last week. One of them was coverage of the war. It's fascinating to me that at recruiting stations all over the country now there are scores of people being turned away, who are trying to volunteer to join the services but don't meet the qualifications. There is some kind of longing for greatness; a desire to live for something beyond just the mundane is suggested in this desire for military service in time of war.

The other thing that was on television that I was fascinated by was a western drama called *Lonesome Dove*. It's a wonderful dramatic production and a wonderful story. It tells of three Texas Rangers at the end of the rangering period in Texas, the friendship they developed, and the lives they built for themselves. It's the story of a cattle drive. The bad guys are really bad, the good guys are really good, the rivers are dangerous, the weather is terrible, the Indians are frightening, and civilization is foolish. Two of the three rangers are men of their word. Central to the story is the fact that they will keep their word, that having made a commitment they will fulfill their commitment, whatever it costs them. And they are magnificent! They make mistakes, but there is a sense of achievement and greatness about them that is transfixing. The third of the three rangers, in contrast, is a man with no backbone at all. He blows whichever way the wind blows, and his word doesn't

mean anything. He ends up dying a tragic death in a life of dishonor. It's a powerful story.

David makes a similar point here. We serve a God who can make something bigger of us than would ever be true left to ourselves. "To you vows are fulfilled." Greater than any word of a Texas Ranger to his friend is a vow made to the living God.

Hearing our prayers

The second observation in this first section of the psalm is that we serve a God who hears prayer. "O you who hear prayer, to you all men will come." "All men" refers to all kinds of men; there is no category that's disallowed. It doesn't mean that everybody will pray -- we know that's not true -- but every kind of person will. Now again, he is saying something about the nature of God. This is a God whose ear is inclined toward us all the time. He's a God who longs for prayer, who doesn't need to be badgered into listening. Prayers that ascend to God and touch him are not the ones that are articulately crafted and skillfully composed in King James English, offered in melodramatic voices. It doesn't matter the skill or the craftsmanship of the one who prays, because God is inclined to hear. Nothing that matters to you, no longing of yours, no statement you would make, no confession, no cry for help, no honest words, none of those will ever be denied, because he is by nature a God who hears prayers. Remember Hagar's words in the wilderness when she was banished from Abraham's house, fearing she would die, yet cared for by God. She said, "You are the God who sees me." what an astonishment! And David is saying here that in addition to being a God who sees, he is by nature a God who hears. We need never feel the slightest hesitation in drawing near to him in prayer.

Thirdly, he speaks of a God who by nature forgives transgressions. "When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions." It is a pattern that is observable over and over again. Again, he is not asking for forgiveness of some particular thing, he is just observing the pattern. I thought of the phrase "overwhelmed by sins" here, and the awful analogy that stood out in my mind was the carpet bombing of the Iraqi Elite Guard dug in in Kuwait right now. What must it be like to have bombs dropped on you day and night, unrelentingly, to have a mad- man controlling your destiny, to have no possibility of going forward or getting out or sticking your head up without being flattened, to know the future is going to be worse than the present. That is what it is like for an individual who is overwhelmed by sin. Raid after raid, destruction after destruction, pressure after pressure. He is hopeless in his sins, guilty and creating more guilt by his actions, overwhelmed. And yet there is a God who intervenes, who forgives sin, who breaks the cycle, raises the man or woman from the dust and gives him honor. This is the sort of God David is speaking to.

Lastly, he says, you are the chooser and we the chosen. "Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts!" Our relationship with him depends not on desperate effort, on superior alertness, deserving it, hanging on, nor any of those things. It depends entirely on his choice of us. That is the great doctrine of our security, that he is the sovereign who makes his choice, and no one can unchoose what he chooses. So we are men and women of utter security in our relationship with him. And it's not just a legal fiction; it produces intimacy. Having chosen us, he brings us into his home, we feast at his banqueting table, and we are closely related in loving friendship with him. That's why the observation of joy. We are fulfilled, content and at peace.

David is talking to God about God himself, and he's saying back to his Father what is true of Him. "This is what you do for folks like us. This is the God we serve. There is something very beautiful about you in these things."

We serve a God who can make something bigger of us than would ever be true left to ourselves

Sovereign of history

He moves on, having spoken of how God deals with individuals, to how God deals with nations or, we might say, history. Now the middle section, verses 5 through 8, is beautiful poetry, and David is using a metaphor. He says that God is the Lord of mountains and oceans and that sort of thing, but the point he's making by metaphor is that he's the Lord of his tory. "You answer us with awesome deeds of righteousness, O God our Savior, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas He is the master of everything, not just Israel. He's not a local god who has control of one little parcel. He is the God of the entire earth, and he

answers in thundering deeds of righteousness. And he's bringing his authority to bear on the mountains and the sea. A mountain in scripture is a metaphor for a king or a kingdom. It's a well-established, secure empire that is ruled from a central point, the highest point of the mountain. It's very strong, very dense, and very much in place. God is the Lord of entrenched or established kings and kingdoms. He's also the lord of the tumultuous limes, the turmoil: the raging ocean, the crashing waves, the blowing wind, the hurricane, the up set. And those are a metaphor for those times in history when nothing is settled, there is no establishment and there is brutality and uncertainty. He's the Lord of that as well. You can see that in verse 7: ". . . who stilled the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the turmoil of the nations," David is observing a God who is Lord of history.

In history our Lord Jesus will banish in judgment every nation and every person who does not bow before him. All human structures that remain will bow before Jesus as Lord. And having done so, they will join him in his purpose, and therefore sing the songs of joy. It is the power of God that breaks whatever rebellion is in us. We are overwhelmed by his greatness, and having been over whelmed, we repent and join him, and we can therefore sing the songs of joy. That is where history is headed. There is coming a time, the millennium, when Jesus will rule from Jerusalem, and all will rejoice with him. And that's why this section, too, ends with songs of joy. "Those living far away [as well as those who are near] fear your wonders; where morning dawns and evening fades, you call forth songs of joy." That is the east and the west morning and evening, the whole earth.

Now, as I've said, this is metaphorical language for what he is doing historically, but it is beautiful poetry, too. I hope that you can enjoy the picture of a dawn and a sunset. David thinks of the utter west and the utter east; he looks at the east and he sees the sun coming up brilliantly in all its color, and he sees in the west the sun going down, and that is beautiful too. It's as if they are singing joyfully. All of these testify to the authority of our Lord over human history. I want to read you a quote from Charles Spurgeon. He comments on verse 8. Just think of the poetry itself apart from its metaphorical value:

When the fair morning blushes with the rosy dawn, we rejoice. And when the cairn evening smiles restfully, we rejoice still. We do not believe that the dew weeps the death Of the day. We only see jewels bequeathed by the departing day for its successor to gather up from the earth. Faith, when she sees God, rounds the day with joy. She can not fast because the bridegroom is with her. Night and day are alike to her. For the same God made them and blessed them. She would have no rejoicing if God did not make her glad. But blessed be his name, he never ceases to make joy for those who find their joy in him.

Those who are brought near in the house of God to feast on his delights are content and at peace. The nations at the end of their course sing the songs of those who have learned to fear the Master. They sing songs of joy.

A renewed earth

The third and last section of this psalm is about redeeming the earth. We hear a wonderful account of the dripping fatness of the earth in right relationship to both God and man, "You care for the land and water it, you enrich it abundantly...you drench its furrows...you soften it with showers and bless its crops. You crown the year with your bounty, and your carts overflow with abundance. The grasslands of the desert overflow; the bills are clothed with gladness. The meadows are covered with flocks, and the valleys are mantled with grain; they shout for joy and sing." It's an awesome description of the earth being what it was intended to be. I am convinced that David is not writing here with the mind of the consumer. He is not saying that the earth will produce its abundance -- and how great for me, more food for me, more grain for my plate! What he's saying is that the earth was in tended by God to be bountiful. It was given a place in his creation, and it was meant to be both beautiful and abundant. The earth itself is looking forward to the day when it can fulfill its role. David is seeing off into the future when the God he serves brings about the earth's redemption, and he's excited for the earth. How great for the planet to get to be what it was intended to be! Not just that it benefits man, but it's a glory for the earth itself. Remember the words of Romans 8:20,21: "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." David is happy for the planet that it gets to be

what it was intended to be.

Consider the devastating oil spill in the Persian Gulf, as once again the earth was treated violently and with desecration, its life forfeited and its beauty scarred, We live in drought-stricken times in this part of the world. The earth is waiting to be given its proper role again, and David is praying to a God who will do that as a gift to the planet itself. Now again, he is not asking for anything. He is seeing human experience, history, agriculture. And behind that he is seeing God who has a character that is knowable by us. The repeated note throughout these observations is joy.

There are other prayers to pray than this. There are times when we are living with tragedy and we are confused; we yell at God, we long for answers and we're frustrated, we ask for our needs to be met or our sins to be forgiven. Those are all Biblical and necessary prayers. They may or may not have a note of joy at the end of them; the pain may last through the prayer to the end. But this kind of prayer, which starts with the character of God and is able to see and speak of him as he is, in every particular will end up with joy and appreciation; contentment stillness, and peace; shouting and laughter. It can't be otherwise. When God is understood for who he is and what our benefit is in him, the only possibility is songs as we hear history singing, the earth singing, and the individuals in the court of God agreeing together. We will pray about temptation and fear at times. We will pray about duties, pressure, and opportunities at other times, But I commend to us as well occasions when we choose to speak to God about who he is for his own sake, and I commend to us the joy that is ours as a result.

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