

## Coram Deo

### Psalm 29

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 5-17-2009

## Introduction

I have recently been debating some Christians on the subject of evolution. Two of them have been vigorously insisting that you can't bring God into science because science only deals with the physical world – that which can be observed and tested in a laboratory. He said that the bible deals with spiritual, invisible reality and science deals with the laws of physics. One of them said, "Science tries to look at the natural world as completely natural, as a perfectly integrated system of laws in which the spiritual concepts of separation, sin and death simply have no meaning as such." And I responded by quoting Van Til, who said: Since God created all things, by, for and through Christ (Col. 1:16) and since He sustains all things (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3), it would be "impossible to interpret any fact without a basic falsification unless it be regarded in its relation to God the Creator and to Christ the Redeemer." (Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidence*, p. iii ) And then I said, "When God is left out of science it becomes a godless science."

Well this is a passage that illustrates what Van Til was saying. For David, it was impossible to look at any aspect of creation without glorying in God's wisdom, power, judgments, mercies, etc. All of creation was shouting God's existence. I would say that David's walk with God was much closer than the walk of these two professing Christians.

One of the problems I frequently encounter among Christians in Omaha is what Francis Schaeffer spoke of as a dichotomy in life between the spiritual and the secular. Many times we think about God in church or during devotions, but have a hard time relating to God in other places or in relating all of life to God. Aaron knows that I have been trying to help him relate art to God and God to art. I've titled this sermon, "Coram Deo," or "Before the Face of God," or learning to worship with our whole life

There will be three points. I. A Call to Worship (vv. 1-2). II. The Motivation for Worship (vv. 3-9). III. The Goal of Worship (vv. 10-11)

## I. A Call To Worship (vv. 1-2)

The call to worship is given in verses 1-2. These are very familiar verses. **Give unto the LORD, O you mighty ones, give unto the LORD**

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**glory and strength. Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name; Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.** What I want to point out is that this call to worship is not given in its original context in a corporate Sabbath gathering. David is caught in a tremendous thunderstorm, which many commentators think is accompanied by a tornado. And David is so awestruck by this display of power that he feels compelled to call others to worship. There isn't anybody else around, so he calls on the angels to worship in verse 1. The Hebrew for "O mighty ones," **בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים** (*bene elim*) refers to angels.

And so this rainstorm was a call to worship. And the point is that worship should not be restricted to Sunday. David doesn't have to wait till he gets to the temple or the synagogue. He finds calls to worship everywhere he goes. Worship is basically glorifying God in all that we do.

Unfortunately, the only call to worship that many Christians ever hear is the one that is given from the pulpit. And even there we sometimes do not respond fully. And I believe the reasons are the same. When I joined Faith Presbyterian Church in Canada some thirty years ago, our church met in a conference room in the Holiday Inn. And there were two old ladies who constantly complained that they couldn't worship properly because we weren't meeting in a church building. The atmosphere just wasn't right. And my first thought was, "Pity the poor people in the book of Acts who met in homes, and in open fields. They never had a chance to 'worship properly!'" Pity the early Christians who met in the catacombs, or the persecuted church that often meets in caves. Most Christians in communist countries, Islamic countries and in African countries do not have what we think of as a church building. And as a result, they have what many of us Westerners would consider too many distractions from worship. I remember sitting on the ground in worship service with Ethiopians with our knees scrunched up, and boy were there distractions. A chicken would run in, and then be shooed away with a squawk. I would watch a bug crawling up the sleeve of someone a few feet away. It was easy to get distracted if your heart was not in it. What is it that causes you to worship or hinders your worship? I think if you can discover that, you will find the difference between living coram deo and being oblivious to God most of the day.

When we come to church in America we often try to shut out the world so that we can tune in to God. But that is to practice the sacred-secular dichotomy. We close our eyes, we get into a quiet chapel or building, we ship the kids off to the nursery, and in many other ways we have developed a dichotomy between life and worship that is not healthy. The only way that some people can feel like they are worshipping is if they are in a certain

context, and I might say that it is a pretty artificial context. People feel very uncomfortable when God is included in a natural or normal context. In fact, you might try this experiment sometime. Try praying to God with your eyes open without warning people that you are going to do so. Somebody is bound to get embarrassed. Why? If God is a constant reality in our lives, we shouldn't have to tune everything out in order to communicate with Him. He should be the most natural part of our conversations.

David had learned how to tune in to God wherever he was. Seeing this thunderstorm caused his heart to well up in worship. And David was prompted to worship by almost everything that he saw. In Psalm 104, seeing a birds nest made him want to worship because he delighted in God's wisdom. Seeing the wonder of cows giving birth, the ocean beating against the shore, the wild goats up on the mountains, and the coney in their rock caves, the sun and the moon, the lions hunting pray. David saw all of those as calls to worship God, not just on Sunday, but wherever he was. Now in verses 1-2 David realizes that we have a tendency to ignore such calls to worship.

The New King James has “**give to the Lord glory and strength.**” The marginal rendering is actually better, and it agrees with the NASB and NIV. It says, “**Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.**” We can't give any glory or strength to the Lord that He does not already have, but we can certainly ascribe to God that glory and power; we can recognize and acknowledge that the glory and power of that thunderstorm that he is about to describe is God's glory and power. And over and over the Israelites forgot that. They ascribed the power to Baal like the Canaanites did. And David is saying, “Baal is not the Lord of the storm, God is.” Now we would never say that Baal was the Lord of the storm, would we? I wouldn't be too sure. What were those Christian scientists doing when they were excluding God from nature and from science. Something has become their god Monday through Friday.

Did you realize that Jacob kept idols for years? When many Old Testament saints kept idols, they didn't do it because they wanted to abandon God. They saw these images as having some kind of intrinsic power sort of like a lucky rabbits foot, or some of the icons and images that the Roman Catholics and some Protestants have. And I have known Christians who superstitiously believe that they will not catch fish unless they wear their lucky hat, or who get excited about a four-leaf clover. That is failing to ascribe to the Lord the glory due unto His name. Others who are not superstitious, are overly mechanistic and don't see God's hand in AIDS, or in storms, in typhoons, or in gentle rains. I didn't ask these Christian

brothers about AIDS and typhoons, but I am sure they would say that God's hand is not in those things. They would probably speak of it as being a fluke, or lucking out if their car escapes the hail damage. We act like Deists and see God as having set laws of nature in motion, but only once in a while interfering with those laws. There is no personalism in nature. What a sad thing to be a scientist and miss the glory of God. It never ceases to amaze me at how close to the truth and yet how far away from the truth Carl Sagan was when he spoke of the wisdom and planning of evolution as if evolution was a person. But are we much different when we view the flight of a cardinal to our feeder, or find a branch that has damaged our roof after a storm?

Many of the things that David praises God for in nature cause us to have awe, amazement and fascination as well, but do they draw our hearts out to God? Do they cause us to worship? Or are we merely fascinated with the intricacies of nature? If we can develop an attitude of worship in our day by day lives that can make the Hymn, How Great Thou Art, a personal testimony, then having that continual attitude of worship, we will be a long way to developing a heart that is focused intently on corporate worship here on the Sabbath. We are not going to complain about the externals so much, but will be drawn to worship because we sense the presence of God in our midst.

## II. The Motivation To Worship - God Is Present (vv. 3-9)

And this leads us to the second point: the motivation for worship is the fact that God is present. Notice that God is mentioned in every verse in this psalm. David does not want us to miss the fact that God thunders through the storm; God tears apart the oak trees; God makes the ground rumble as the tornado comes roaring through like a freight train and God leaves a path of destruction through the forest. I wish you could read the poem in Hebrew for yourself, because David makes it sound like a thunderstorm just by the words he uses. My professor in seminary was an expert in Hebrew, and he read this psalm to us one time, and it sent chills up my spine to hear the onomatopoeia. It was just beautiful. I can't replicate that for you, but let me just give you a few examples:

The repeated phrase "the voice of the Lord" that is repeated over and over sounds like thunder off in the distance: קוֹל־יְהוָה קוֹל־יְהוָה קוֹל־יְהוָה. But when it is put in conjunction with other words it gives the feel of the storm coming in, moving overhead and dissipating into the east. In verse 3 the storm is brewing out over the Mediterranean, and in the language you can hear a small soft rumble of thunder and a little bit of

reverb in the Hebrew. In verse 4 as the storm moves inland there is a much sharper sound of thunder through onomatopoeia: The first phrase shows the crash קוֹל־יְהוָה בַּכַּף (Kohl Yahweh bacoach) and then the next phrase the reverb קוֹל יְהוָה בְּהַדָּר (kohl yahweh bahador – just a little bit softer). But in verse 5 you have the most awesome language, and the words that are chosen for the cedars breaking are onomatopoeic: שֹׁבֵר אֲרָזִים וַיִּשְׁבֹּר (shover aratzim wayeshabar). It's almost like a ripping sound. Now my Hebrew teacher could do much better in showing that all the way through the Psalm. But as we go on into verses 6 through 9 you can hear the storm pass over head from the first mountain range of Lebanon, to the next mountain range where Sirion or Mount Hermon is located, and then dissipating into the steppes of Kadesh in the east.

And the reason David uses these words is not only give the feel for the storm, but also to make it unmistakably clear that God controlled every branch that fell, and every wind that blew. We who are in an age of science tend to be very skeptical about ascribing too much meaning to rain, sun, falling leaves, bugs, etc. saying that God brings it upon just and the unjust, and the implication is that since it seems indiscriminate, therefore it doesn't have meaning. We tend to view weather, pests, mildew and earthquakes like the Deists do. We think: "Yes, God controls the weather, but not in a personal way. He just sets laws in motion so that Southern California is always going to be different in weather patterns than Nebraska is irrespective of what people live there." They don't see any cause and effect in this world. And I will admit that it is true that God makes desert regions and luxuriant regions, but He doesn't just wind up a clock and let it run. God is present in the storm. He is present in the drought. We do not just deal with impersonal laws in motion. In nature we are witnessing a personal God who is orchestrating every detail with a purpose and a goal in mind; guaranteeing that all things work together for our personal good.

Let's read verses 3-9 with this in mind.

**Psalms 29:3 The voice of the LORD is over the waters;**

**The God of glory thunders;**

**The LORD is over many waters.**

**Psalms 29:4 The voice of the LORD is powerful;**

**The voice of the LORD is full of majesty.**

**Psalms 29:5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars,**

**Yes, the LORD splinters the cedars of Lebanon.**

**Psalms 29:6 He makes them also skip like a calf,**

**Lebanon and Sirion like a young wild ox.**

**Psalms 29:7 The voice of the LORD divides the flames of fire.**

**Psalms 29:8 The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;**

**The LORD shakes the Wilderness of Kadesh.****Psalms 29:9 The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth,****And strips the forests bare;****And in His temple everyone says, “Glory!”**

At least the angels are awestruck with God’s hand in nature, even if the scientists are not. It’s not just during special times like the Exodus, or the conquest of Canaan, or Jonah in the storm, or other judgments that God controls the weather for special purposes. There is what Gary North calls “a cosmic personalism.” In other words, God’s personal relationship to us is seen throughout the cosmos. In Zechariah 2 God says that He controls the winds just as surely as He controls the nations. Revelation 7:1 says that God commands certain angels who control the winds to keep the wind from blowing for a specified period of time. 1 Samuel 12:19-18 says that destructive rain came at harvest time (and ruined the harvest) came because Israel asked for a king. They may not have known that that was the reason for that rain if Samuel didn’t tell them, or unless they had been sensitive to self-examination, but it was just as real. And they should have known that from the law. Deuteronomy 11 and 28 indicates that throughout Israel’s entire history and even during the captivity, God would use the weather along with pests, mildew and other natural occurrences as aspects of discipline and reward. When God tells Job about His personal hand in all aspects of creation, Job repents of his blindness and is awestruck with God’s goodness.

Can you see why there is the immediate response of praise from the angels in verse 9? It says, “**And in His temple, everyone says, ‘Glory!’**” Angels live coram deo. We have a hard time doing that. Everyone in God’s heavenly temple cries glory because they see God’s hand at work, and His wisdom and power and majesty. It takes God’s personal presence in the storm to illicit such a response. There is no such thing as chance in God’s world, and we do a dishonor to God when we look at the weather as if it is arbitrary. If a thunderstorm elicits a “**Glory!**” from the angels, it ought to elicit a “**Glory, Hallelujah!**” from God’s people too. Or if we sense that it is a judgment, then it ought to illicit a humbling of ourselves before God. This is one of the things that I appreciate about the Puritans. Some modern scientists would say they were superstitious in ascribing so much meaning to Providence. I would say, “No. They were men of true science and true learning because they saw God’s hand in everything.” The other science is what the Bible speaks of as “science falsely so-called.”

I’ve got another book that I would like to recommend. It is *The Light and the Glory*, by Peter Marshall and David Manuel. This one is fun

reading, but it gives a theological interpretation to the early years of the founding of America, from God's sending of Columbus to the settling of the Puritans and the Pilgrims and later into America's history. And these authors show how none of these details was by accident. This is one of the reasons we are having the Providential History Festival at the Strategic Air and Space Museum – having it in a church gives the false impression that it's only Biblical history that is providential. I hope all of you can enjoy the Providential History Festival this fall.

But back to the Puritans. One of the things that really impressed me was the immediate response that drought and rain brought from God's people. These pilgrims saw God's hand in everything from the Indians who saved their lives to the Indians who attacked them; from plagues and droughts, to unparalleled health and gentle rains. And when you see all these details brought together by Peter Marshall and David Manuel you come to love Providential History. It makes you worship. Thanksgiving day was a heartfelt response of the people to God for His mercies to them, not as modern textbooks teach, a thanksgiving to the Indians. The Pilgrims and Puritans saw God as present and personal in all their affairs. And because they were able to respond to God's calls to worship in nature, I think it enabled them to respond to God's calls to worship from the pulpit in a much more gutsy and full-hearted way than we tend to. They saw God as powerfully present in their worship services and it caused them to fear, to love, to bow down. It had nothing to do with the atmosphere. If you think that our atmosphere is lacking, you should have sat in their services, which were three to four hours long, most of which was preaching. But the motive for worship for them was God's personal presence.

### III. The Goal Of Worship (vv. 10-11)

This psalm ends with the two-fold goal of worship – 1) give God glory 2) and receive blessing. The first part, and the most important part is what *we give* to God in worship: we enthrone Him on our praises and acknowledge Him as king. Verse 9 says, “**And in his temple everyone cries, ‘Glory!’**” That's what they see – God's glory. Verse 10 says, **The LORD sat enthroned at the Flood, and the LORD sits as King forever.** They are focused upon worshipping God. He was, is and will be King, yesterday, today and forever. That is the purpose of worship. To ascribe this glory to God. God will share His glory with none other. He will not share it with the preacher; He will not share it with the drummer or the pianist. And when nature calls us to worship on Tuesday, He will not share

the glory with chance, with the thunder, with the hail. Our awe at the power of nature should be translated into awe at the power and majesty of the King who commands the weather. And Romans 1 says that the moment our attention turns from serving God to serving the creation, we have lost our purpose and have become idolaters. The same is true on Sunday. The moment our attention turns from serving God to the *things* that attend worship; the moment we come to worship to be *served*, rather than to serve, then we will find the blessing of the second half of this verse is not ours. The first goal of worship is critical. If we are to have the blessing of verse 11, then we must come to worship with the attitude of verse 10 and the last phrase of verse 9. If you are focused on what you give rather than on what you receive, distractions are not quite as important.

But having done that, the second goal of worship becomes true and the worshipper who comes to offer sacrificial worship finds that God pours out refreshing grace into his own life. **The LORD will give strength to His people; The LORD will bless His people with peace.** That's a second great reason to come to worship: **"The LORD will give strength to His people; The LORD will bless His people with peace."**

So this psalm starts with a call to worship and it ends with a pronouncement of the blessings that come to God's worshippers. Why is it then that we are often not strengthened in worship? Why is it that we don't find His supernatural peace? Worship committees are often trying one thing after another to change the environment of worship in the hopes that people will be blessed. *I think this psalm gives us a hint. If we don't find God present in the storm, it is doubtful we will find Him present in the pew. If God is not at the center of our lives six days a week, it is doubtful He will fill our hearts one day a week. Calvin summarized the entire Christian life with the phrase, coram deo, meaning, before the face of God. The Christian life is a life lived in the personal presence of God.*

## Conclusion

My conclusion is this: There is no need to blot out reality in order to worship. That is like saying that I must blot out all the works of God so that I can experience God working. It is a contradiction. And I have found myself with all distractions removed, all by myself in my study, and my heart still wandered, and I was still unable to worship. Why? Because my heart did not have an attitude of worship. In America we try to shut out the world so that we can tune in to God. David had learned how to tune in to God wherever he was. In this case he was caught in a thunderstorm. He didn't need to close his eyes. He didn't need to go to the temple or the



synagogue to be spurred to worship. In Psalm 104, David in effect sings what we will be singing in a couple minutes.

Oh Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder  
Consider all the works Thy hands have made  
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder  
Thy pow'r throughout, the universe displayed.  
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee  
How Great Thou art! How great Thou art!  
Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee  
How Great Thou art. How great Thou art!

May each of us live coram deo. Amen.

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