

A Prayer for the Inspired (Psalm 96) - February 11th, 2024 (Draft #2)

A number of years ago my wife Taryn and I were driving through the countryside a few hours from where we were living at the time, when on the near horizon the most incredible rock formation appeared. It rose higher than the surrounding landscape and had a somewhat flat top with near vertical cliffs all around. As we followed the road and drove in a wide loop around it for about 20 minutes I was just mesmerized, craning my neck, crouching at the wheel to continue to catch glimpses of it from different angles. I found it just beautiful.

I later did research and found out that it was called 'Swinburne', and there were some sport climbing routes already established on it, and even though it was hours away I figured out how we could end up driving past it again in the upcoming months. I so deeply wanted to experience it more fully by not just seeing it, but climbing it! The climbing routes were what's called 'multi-pitch', and I had yet to do those types of climbs at that point, so I did research and set up gear in our backyard to practice the anchors and belay stations that I'd need to know. And finally, a few months later we planned a trip that would go past Swinburne, and along with my brother-in-law Keith and sister Shawna we climbed the 8 pitches up a beautiful route to the summit. And it was just a joy. I still think back on it happily. Something in me had just felt drawn in appreciation of the beauty of that place, I couldn't turn away, and I wanted to experience it more fully. And when I did it drew me into some deeper elements of what I love about nature and climbing and some of the close relationships in my life.

Last week we started a new message series that we're calling "A Prayer for All Seasons", as a bit of an overview of the Psalms, which are songs and poems collected together into a book that you can find right near the physical middle of your Bible. As Tom taught last week, this

collection of 150 Psalms by different presumed authors is divided into different sections and themes. And one of the recurring themes in the Psalms is PRAISE.

Now, maybe you find that there are certain words that are prominent in the Bible that you're not quite sure what to do with, sometimes for how they've been USED by the Church, how we've experienced them being used, and for what we now presume them to mean. I think that praise is one of those words, or at least I know that it is for me. It's a word that DOES occur broadly in our culture (you can 'praise' a colleague's work ethic, or a new acquaintance says that your mutual friend had been 'singing your praises'), but it's not that common, and often it's associated with church culture, in regards to praise for God. Psalm 96 is one of these songs that's known as a 'praise Psalm', and it gets right to the point, as it opens with the lines, ***“Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples. For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise...” (Psalm 96:1-4).***

Depending on our background and perspective on both the Church and God, that may strike us in different ways.

Mid-century Christian thinker and author CS Lewis names the fact that we often frame the concept of 'praise' within our own experiences of self-importance, which leaves a bad taste in our mouth. He writes,

“We all despise the man who demands continued assurance of his own virtue, intelligence or delightfulness; we despise still more the crowd of people round every dictator, every millionaire, every celebrity, who gratify that demand. Thus a picture, at once ludicrous and

horrible, both of God and His worshippers, threatened to appear in my mind...It was hideously like [God] saying, "What I most want is to be told that I am good and great." – CS Lewis

Lewis found that, based on how we often think of praise among our usual contexts, it feels like a self-serving demand from people in positions of power, and a pandering response from everyone around them who wants to get something from them. An ugly demand (or, 'hideous', in Lewis' language) and an equally ugly response. In our culture of celebrity worship and financial gain from people's attention on social media I'm sure we can all think of examples of how that plays out. And how it plays out for US.

This doesn't seem to be what is happening in the psalms of praise. Part of the reason is because God is not IMPOSING a DEMAND on people to worship God. Rather, the poets are making responsive statements about what they've EXPERIENCED with God. In the poetry of these lyrics they're not always describing the details of WHAT they've experienced. But they're naming some of the impact that it's had on them, and the impression that it's left about WHO God is.

It's thought that Psalm 96, which had opened with those lines of praise to God, may have been written in the context of King David and his people defeating one of their enemies in battle and bringing the ark of the covenant back to Jerusalem, since most of the lines from this Psalm are found written in 1 Chronicles 16, where that story is told. The symbol of the ark (you can picture it; the gold chest with the angels stretched across it) was associated with God in opposition with the gods of their enemies, and in this Psalm the writer states from their vantage point that ***"Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens."*** (Psalm 96:4-

6). In the middle of their own time and place, full of violence and conflict, they are naming ways that they've experienced safety and freedom, and they attributing it to God. The Psalmist has experienced a time of celebration and CAN'T HELP but shout it out, it's not God that is REQUIRING that they PRAISE. My visceral response to unexpectedly seeing a place like Swinburne for the first time felt like that. And I actually think that that's what it was: to me, it was praise of the beauty and excitement of what I understand to be God's good creation. The requirement is internal: If you've ever been watching a football game on your own, and on seeing a great play just jumped up and called out "what a catch!", then you know what I mean. That was an internal response to something that RESONATED with you. A novel with some writing so profound that you need to stop and look around for a moment to reorient yourself. A taste of food that's so good that you need to close your eyes to savor it. You weren't REQUIRED externally, but you were required INTERNALLY as your own natural response.

To CS Lewis, praise is not about God IMPOSING DOMINANCE over us and us responding to try to get something from God, like the human versions of praise-seeking. Rather the invitation is to pay attention to the CONTENT of what God is all about. It's an 'appraisal' of who God is. The word 'praise' comes from the same root as the word 'appraise', which is to assess something's value. You get a house appraised to know what it's actually worth. So, something that is worthy of 'praise' is something that has been appraised, or assessed to BE OF VALUE. When something is good or beautiful in the truest way, an appropriate step is first to actually NOTICE it, and then our first natural response is to actually APPRECIATE it. We might call it a 'proportional reaction'. If you're a sports fan and it's a great play, your proportional reaction is to jump up and cheer. If you're someone who appreciates nature, seeing a rare bird or a hidden

valley causes you to stop in wonder and just soak it in. If you're a music lover and a long-awaited album from a favourite artist comes out you might need carve out an uninterrupted hour in your favourite spot to appreciate it. My reaction to seeing Swinburne felt like my personal proportional response to an incredible place. For the Psalmist, a poet, they couldn't help but offer the proportional response of poetic exclamation for what they'd experienced from God.

We all have deep-seated joys like this that are unique to each of us in our own ways, and so important to who we are, to how we are wired, to who we have been CREATED to be. But do we generally take the time to ACKNOWLEDGE that God is at the root of that, as a creator that DELIGHTS in us, as it says in Psalm 35? This is our act of APPRAISAL, of seeing the goodness, and understanding it's source. When a loved one gives you a gift that's just PERFECT, do we jump up and walk away in celebration over the gift itself, or do we look at our loved one in amazement at how well they know us, and appreciation for what they've done, and come to them with a hug and a thank you? That's a proportional reaction to recognizing specific gifts from God, whatever they may be, including the daily gift of life.

In Psalm 96, the Psalmist continues from first declaring their own experience of God, to CELEBRATING that experience with OTHERS: ***"Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name..." (Psalm 96:7-8)***. This is someone thousands of years ago, and thousands of kilometers away, in a completely different culture and language, using the very specific medium of poetry. But what they're doing here is very familiar to us. When we've received the gift of seeing TRUE GOODNESS and BEAUTY, we don't generally keep it to ourselves, but we invite others to share in

it as well. “**Look** at that sunset!”; “This wine is amazing, **taste** it!”; “I just sent you a link to a great song I just heard, **listen** to it and tell me what you think!”

Do you remember the story of Chris McCandless? There was a book and later a movie called ‘Into the Wild’, in which Chris abandoned his car, burned his money, and took off to live as freely as he could, unencumbered by ‘society’. He had some amazing adventures over the next few years, but sadly ended up passing away in the Alaskan wilderness. Near him they found that one of the last things that he wrote was, “Happiness only real when shared.” I think there are instances where that may not be exclusively true, but I think that it gets to the heart of this second part of the praise Psalms. That praise, as a natural outpouring from ourselves, naturally invites other people to share in it as well. Look, listen, taste! Pay attention to who God is and to what God is doing. In Psalm 34 it says, “**Taste and see that the Lord is good...**”. This is a poet’s PUBLIC RECOGNITION of what they’ve experienced, and an invitation to experience it as well.

In Psalm 96, what FLOWS FROM this invitation unlocks HOW we can lean into experiencing God in ways that result in the PROPORTIONAL RESPONSE of praise, and the inspiration to PUBLIC RECOGNITION of what God is doing. ALTHOUGH, at FIRST glance, it looks like now is where there’s a catch to the whole thing. The poet writes:

“Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.” (Psalm 96:10-13)

Now, here’s where it seems to confirm our suspicions, that praise is a ‘praise me or else’ type of arrangement. I mean, the invitation previously seemed to be to APPRAISE God! But now the focus is turned back on US. And a focus on judgement doesn’t FEEL like a positive. I mean,

one of the key characteristics that Christians are known for is JUDGEMENTALISM. Naming that God is coming to judge the world feels inherently NEGATIVE for everyone. Or, perhaps even harder to swallow, since the Psalmist is CELEBRATING God's judgement, maybe this is a moment where someone who feels like an insider to God's favour is exulting in punishment for people they assume to be outsiders to God's favour. What was CS Lewis' line? That's a picture that feels both ludicrous and horrible. But the Psalmist here tells us that God coming to judge is worth celebrating by EVERYTHING and EVERYONE, all of creation! God is here to JUDGE! So, why would this be universally GOOD news? To the Psalmist, it's because of HOW God evaluates creation: ***"he will judge the peoples with EQUITY"*** (Psalm 96:10) and ***"He will judge the world in RIGHTEOUSNESS and the peoples in his FAITHFULNESS."*** (Psalm 96:13).

The different Psalmists paint lots of pictures of God through these songs and poems, and many of them, including Psalm 96, are thought to prophetically point towards the CLEARER picture that we would ever be given of God: the person of JESUS. At one point in the New Testament gospel stories of his life, Jesus had a private moment with his disciples in which he invited them to name what people were saying about him, before asking the disciples themselves: ***"Who do YOU say that I am?"*** (Mark 8:29). Jesus invited their APPRAISAL of what they had seen of him.

The disciples, through Peter, respond: "You are the Messiah" (meaning, the Savior), and some of the stories also include him saying "the Son of the living God". For the disciples, having SEEN what Jesus was all about, they name that he is the Messiah, the LIBERATOR, that he is about reflecting the heart of God by freeing people who are oppressed. People who are overlooked, vulnerable, disadvantaged and despised...being seen, accompanied, supported, and

loved. They have seen that love for such people around them is the heart of EVERYTHING that the Scriptures have told them about God, that these are their NEIGHBOURS, and that love of their NEIGHBOURS is on par with love of God as the key to life.

No, God is not offering us an ultimatum, to PRAISE God or else. Praise is not REQUIRED of us in that way. It comes as a proportional reaction to what we experience OF God. But it is what God ACTUALLY requires that plays a role in TRIGGERING that TRUE experience of God. The prophet Micah writes, ***“...what DOES the LORD REQUIRE of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)*** HUMILITY alongside God, towards JUSTICE and LOVING MERCY for others.

Psalm 96 says that God is coming to do God’s OWN appraisal through THAT lens. EQUITY. RIGHTEOUSNESS. FAITHFULNESS. That means the lifting up of people who have been cast down. You may have seen this visual representation of EQUITY: Equity means people being SEEN, SHARING together in goodness, not keeping it to ourselves. It’s beyond EQUALITY, because it’s beautifully PERSONAL, tailored to what everyone NEEDS. And when we learn to TAKE ACTION in these ways, to see someone else and pass on what we have to them, in relationship, it becomes a CELEBRATION involving EVERYONE! Here’s ONE translation of this latter part of Psalm 96:

“Get out the message—GOD Rules! He put the world on a firm foundation; He treats everyone fair and square. Let’s hear it from Sky, with Earth joining in, and a huge round of applause from Sea. Let Wilderness turn cartwheels, Animals, come dance, put every tree of the forest in the choir—an extravaganza before GOD as he comes, as he comes to set everything right on earth, set everything right, treat everyone fair.” (Psalm 96:10-13)

PRAISE then is NOTICING what's GOOD, and CELEBRATING it. And THIS GOD values HUMILITY, JUSTICE and LOVING MERCY, and so our PRAISE is not demanded of us by a prideful and grasping God. Rather, when out of PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY we RESPOND to these values of God, we see that this is how God is treating EVERYONE, and so how God invites US to treat everyone. And through Jesus we know that this carries special emphasis on those who are most different from ourselves, and who are most vulnerable.

There's a cyclical nature to this entire praise Psalm, Psalm 96. First, we're invited to a 'Proportional Reaction' to who God is and what God does. The automatic reaction of praise. Second, to inviting others to witness that beauty as well, to the 'Public Recognition', or sharing of that goodness. And third, to participate in the 'Personal Responsibility' of the nature of God, in love for others (to judge or appraise others the way that God does, in love), which leads us TO PRAISE.

I may say, "I actually don't generally automatically NOTICE and APPRAISE where God is at work, so it doesn't generally turn into an outpouring of PRAISE." We may have simple examples, like me noticing and responding to the beauty of a place like Swinburne and going deeper to experience it more fully, but I don't experience that every day. But THAT'S why JESUS so specifically and consistently points us in the direction of OTHERS. Because THAT'S where we'll find the invitation to WORK for EQUITY, and where we SEE God at work in RIGHTEOUSNESS and FAITHFULNESS (making things right and not stopping until it's done!), and we will find that THAT speaks to the DEEPEST parts of ourselves and WE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO HELP BUT PRAISE, BECAUSE THAT IS GOOD! "Set everything right, treat everyone fair." (Psalm 96:13).

CS Lewis was disturbed at the thought of a God who, out of insecurity, needed our praise, while we, out of grasping to please, grudgingly offer it. The picture of praise as a natural response to true, others-centred goodness is something different altogether, and more in line with what Lewis eventually concludes. He says, **“I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment.” – CS Lewis**

Psalm 96 says, “Sing to the Lord a NEW song.” In light of a God who is “great and most worthy of praise”, who leads us to see the world with a focus on EQUITY, RIGHTEOUSNESS and FAITHFULNESS, a question for all of us, myself included, is how are we APPRAISING the worth of God TODAY? And if we are finding that there is VALUE in who God is, and what God does, who God focuses on, then what’s our response, TODAY? Who are the people I am meant to accompany towards EQUITY, treat RIGHTLY with RIGHTEOUSNESS, and how can we help each other to be FAITHFUL in that life? I think that that’s the heart of Psalm 96, and all of the Psalms of praise. And whether or not any of us are poets, we’re invited to live that kind of life of PRAISE.