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Psalms Volume XI

Speechless

Psalm 65

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God is *not* great, according to Christopher Hitchens in the new book by that title.¹ Christopher Hitchens is, by his own admission, an atheist, a secular humanist, and believes that religion is destroying the world. I don't know much about him. On the back cover *The New Yorker* says, He's "an intellectual willing to show his teeth in the cause for righteousness." The *London Observer* says, He's "one of the most prolific, as well as brilliant, journalists of our time."

I'm sure he is extremely bright and probably very gifted. Inside the front flyleaf the publisher says this: "In this eloquent argument...Hitchens makes the ultimate case against religion (and for a more secular approach to life) [How does he do that?] through a close and learned reading of the major religious texts."

So I thought, *That's interesting. He's going to tell us why there is no God from reading the Scripture.* "Hitchens tells the personal story of his own dangerous encounters with religion and describes his intellectual journey toward a secular view of life based on science and reason."

Now that's the promise of the publisher—that this eloquent argument is going to come on the basis of the reading of the Scripture and on the basis of science and reason. So that, of course, caught my attention, and I decided to read the book. So I did, and by the time I got to page 15, I had a question. In describing the central theme of Christianity, he says, "If you obey the rules and commandments that he [meaning God] has lovingly prescribed, you will qualify for an eternity of bliss and repose."

I thought, *Well, that's interesting, we're only to page 15 and what he understands to be the central theme of Christianity is not only wrong, it's the polar opposite of everything the Bible teaches.* He believes it's on the basis of performance that we merit favor with God. He has missed it by a mile. I thought, *Well, that doesn't reflect a careful learned study of the religious text.* He goes on to say,

The level of intensity fluctuates according to time and place, but it can be stated as a truth that religion does not, and in the long run cannot, be content with its own marvelous claims and sublime assurances. It *must* seek to interfere with the lives of nonbelievers....It may speak about the bliss of the next world, but it wants power in this one. This is only to be expected. It is, after all, wholly manmade. And it does not have the confidence in its own various preachings even to allow coexistence between different faiths. (p. 17)

Now this is the part I assume is reason. But stop and think about this. What so deeply offends him is that religious people so believe what they believe that they interfere in the lives of unbelievers.

So let's think of it this way. Let's imagine that I'm out on a county road. It's in the middle of the night. We're in the middle of a great storm, and I find out the bridge is out. Aren't I morally obligated at that point to stop other cars coming along before they plummet into the river and die? Would you call that *interfering* in the lives of people who did not know the bridge was out? Or would you call that my moral responsibility?

I understand Mr. Hitchens doesn't believe what we believe. But if he understood anything about what we believe, he would understand we have to be morally obligated—if we really believe this—to tell those who don't believe. To know what we know and keep it to ourselves would be morally irresponsible. So I'm thinking, *This isn't even reasoned well.*

The second thing he says is: Because we so lack confidence in our message, we are not willing to allow religions that have contradictory beliefs to coexist without saying something. In other words, what he's saying is we ought to believe our message so confidently that we're willing to allow other religions with contradictory beliefs to coexist and we're fine with that.

May I ask you a question, “Does that make any sense to you? Wouldn't it be the opposite? If we're so confident in our belief system that any belief system that runs contradictory would *have* to be objected or refused?”

So I'm only 17 pages into the book and I'm thinking, *You know, this isn't about reading our religious text. It isn't about reason. And we're going to see it isn't about science.* As a matter of fact, you read the rest of the book and you find it's just filled with anecdotal stories about religions all over the world—and these religious people persecute these religious people, and this religious person was bad to this person, and religious people in the Middle East blow other people up—and on that conclusion all religion is bad. Or on that conclusion God can't exist.

I would say that's the summary of his argument. You're finding yourself thinking, *Wait a minute, here! This isn't an impressive argument. This isn't science. This isn't reason. This isn't based on the religious text. This is Genesis chapter 3, the dividing point of all mankind. This is someone who is so determined to be his own god and call his own shots and run his own life that he is determined to refuse to believe that there is a God.*

His viewpoint is quite a contrast to our psalm this morning, where David opens up Psalm 65 and says God *is* great. If you have a Bible this morning, turn with me to Psalm 65. What I'd like to do this morning is interplay the psalm a little bit with what Hitchens has to say, and try to understand what makes the difference in perspective or viewpoint.

Psalm 65 is written by David, although there's some dispute on that. Again, there's a note: “for the choir director,” which tells us this is meant to be a song. It's part of the community of faith's worship together. Nobody is quite sure of the background of the psalm, although I think the weight of the evidence is that this psalm was systematically used every fall during what was called the Feast of Tabernacles, which was an eight-day feast, the longest of all the feasts, that celebrated the coming in of the harvest, which is obvious by the latter part of the psalm.

But I think the key is to understand what immediately preceded the Feast of Tabernacles was Yom Kippur, Day of Atonement. And that's the way this psalm is written, that once you understand the reality of the Day of Atonement, then the harvest looks different because you see it through redeemed eyes—and that's the essence and the heartbeat of the psalm.

Verse 1:

There will be silence before You, and praise in Zion, O God, and to You the vow will be performed. (Psalm 65:1, *NASB)

When he talks about Zion there, it depends a little bit on the time period. It might be talking about a mountain; it might be talking about the tabernacle; it might be talking about the temple—depending

on the time period. The differences really aren't important. The point is, in the old covenant, God was represented geographically. That's a little hard for us to get our minds around. We just don't think that way. But God dwelt on His mountain; He dwelt in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle; He dwelt in the Holy of Holies in the temple. That was geographically where God was.

So on certain special occasions the people would gather together, they would ascend this hill, and they would move into the presence of God. There was a sense in which *God dwells there and we're about to enter His presence*. They would sing these marvelous hymns and they would shout together, and it was really quite a dramatic experience as they were entering into the presence of God.

In verse 1, when he says, **“There will be silence before You,”** I think what he's saying is—the psalms are filled with expressions of worship. We sing; we clap; we raise our hands; we dance. All of those are very right and very appropriate. But there are times when you enter into the presence of God and it is just so overwhelming, it is just so stunning, that the only appropriate response is just to be silent, to be speechless before God because there is nothing that can be said.

I think what he is describing is what they just came through the Day of Atonement. That was one of those moments—where the high priest would enter into the courtyard and into the Holy Place and ultimately into the Holy of Holies once a year. That was such a sacred moment as to whether or not God would receive that payment, that it wasn't a time for clapping, it wasn't a time for singing. It was a time to just be quiet, and they were stunned at the awesome holiness of God.

Out of that, when God received the payment of the Atonement, they would then erupt into praise, which was the Feast of Tabernacles, and that's related in verse 1. **“There is silence before God, and praise in Zion.”** You kind of get the response out of that.

“And to You the vow will be performed.” The vow, the promise, will be obeyed. I think it's just the reality that God is worthy of their worship, and they're promising that they will be a worshipful people. They will keep that vow or that commitment.

Verse 2:

O You who hear prayer, to You all men [or the Hebrew is “all flesh”] come.

There is the reality that only the God of the Hebrews actually hears prayer and responds. In the midst of thousands and thousands and thousands of gods in the ancient world, there was an understanding that only one God, at the end of the day, actually hears and only one God actually responds. People from all flesh—not limited to just the Hebrew people, but all flesh—will eventually realize there's only one God that lives and answers prayer.

I think about this every time we go to India and I see hundreds and thousands of people lined up to pray to a piece of concrete. My heart breaks for them because I want them to know: *That piece of concrete can't hear you, can't do anything for you! There's only one God that hears prayer and answers prayer—and that's the God of all flesh, the God of gods.* That's what David is saying.

Verse 3:

Iniquities prevail against me; as for our transgressions, You forgive them.

The point of the text is really not the difference between transgressions and iniquities. Both are talking about our sins. It's that they overwhelm us. It's that they overwhelm us to where we are

drowning in these sins. Imagine these people starting to ascend the hill, and they're moving into the presence of a holy God. They're so aware of their sinfulness and their unworthiness. And they wonder about the atonement as they ascend the hill. That's the sobering moment of the year. Yet David says, **"As for our transgressions, You forgive them."**

That word "forgive" is the Hebrew word for "You cover them; You atone for them." It is the Hebrew word for atonement. What's interesting about this word is that it is only used three times in all of the Psalms. So every time it is used, it's very significant—here clearly pointing to the Day of Atonement. They have just come through that, and the reality is that as sinful as they are and as much as they are aware of God's holiness and overwhelmed with their own sinfulness, God has forgiven them and they celebrate the reality of God's atonement.

In reading through Hitchens' book, he's quite offended at the atonement and he tells us that. His logic is going from the reality that originally there were religions where you took someone like a virgin and you threw her in the volcano, and that somehow made the gods happy. Well, Christianity has pushed that to where God was the one doing the torturing. Hitchens says,

Once again we have a father demonstrating love by subjecting a son to death by torture, but this time the father is not trying to impress god. He is god, and he is trying to impress humans. [Again, ask yourself: If this is based on a careful reading of the religious text, how is it possible his conclusion is the atonement is an attempt to impress humans? I mean, it isn't even in the ballpark. Ask yourself the question: How moral is the following?] **I am told of a human sacrifice that took place two thousand years ago, without my wishing it and in circumstances so ghastly that if I had been present and in possession of any influence, I would have been duty bound to try to stop it. In consequence of this murder, my own manifold sins are forgiven me and I may hope to enjoy everlasting life.**"(p. 209)

What he is questioning is the morality of the atonement. That's what he asks: How moral could it possibly be if a father tortures his son—in such a way that if he had been there, he is so morally superior he would have had to have stopped it, if he had the possibility to do so—in order that other people might receive the forgiveness of sins?

What he finds so morally reprehensible is what we refer to as grace. He's saying it's immoral, and what he's referring to is it's unfair. It's unfair that the Father would do that to His Son on behalf of someone else. But we as believers understand we have never claimed this is fair. We have always understood it to be grossly unfair. But that doesn't make it immoral. It's this wonderful, scandalous truth we call grace—that God would die on our behalf that we might have forgiveness of sin.

Is it unfair? Of course it is. Is it immoral? No, it's not. It's grace. David is overwhelmed by the grace of God. Rather than being offended by it, as Hitchens is, he's stunned by it. He's speechless. He's silent in the presence of God. How is this possible? And yet it is. We're overwhelmed with our sin, but God forgives us.

Verse 4:

How blessed [how happy, how joyful—it's the same word from Psalm 1] **is the one whom You choose and bring near to You.** (v. 4a)

We get into the doctrine of election here, which is a very mysterious, hard-to-understand doctrine. The point is God, for reasons only God knows, chose you. This morning there are people all over

this city—people we work with, people we go to school with, friends and neighbors that are in total hopelessness and despair. And they are searching everywhere for something that will satisfy. People all over the world struggle to figure out what ultimately will satisfy—many of them praying to pieces of stone and concrete. For reasons only God knows, He chose you that you might know Him, that you might experience His forgiveness, that you might be invited into His presence.

Understand again, in the old covenant when God was geographically located, there was a sense in which they entered into the courtyard, they entered into the temple area, and God dwelt in the Holy of Holies. That's exactly the way the verse goes:

...to dwell in Your courts. We will be satisfied with the goodness of Your house, Your holy temple. (v. 4b)

There's a progression there: that God has invited us on the basis of His atonement to come near to Him. God chose you and said, "I want to know you. I want to be intimate with you. I want to invite you into My dwelling. Come through the courtyard. Come through the house. Come all the way into the Holy of Holies and dwell with Me."

David says, "This is what is good. This is what satisfies." This is what gives his life joy and happiness and meaning. But it is so unimaginable, it just stuns him and he is there in silence.

Verses 1 through 4, I think, are describing a reflection on the Day of Atonement and how absolutely indescribable that moment is—that God would choose us and invite us into His presence on the basis of His atonement. It's on the basis of that redemption, on the basis of that relationship, that intimacy, that David's view of God is changed and formed. It affects how he views everything else—just as Hitchens' worldview affects how he looks at everything.

Starting then in verse 5, we move in essence into the Feast of Tabernacles. He says:

By awesome deeds You answer us in righteousness, O God of our salvation, You who are the trust of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest sea.

Apparently God answered a significant prayer. Maybe they had been in years of drought or something. But God had answered them and they're declaring, "God, You are God. You hear our prayer. You answer with this awesome deed. You are the trust of all the earth." It could be translated, "You are the hope of all the earth." There's only one God.

Verse 6:

Who establishes the mountains by His strength, being girded with might."

David looks at the mountains and says, "God did that!" They're girded with His might—used to describe the might of a warrior. Maybe he's talking about trees or rocks, something that girds around the base of the mountain. He says, "God, You made that mountain. God, that's a picture of Your strength."

Who stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the tumult of the peoples. (v. 7)

There are very few things as intimidating as a sea or an ocean in the midst of a storm. The power is just overwhelming. That was viewed in the ancient world as this awesome display of power. As this ocean is in turmoil, it's God who created the ocean, it's God who stills the sea. And it's God

who settles the turmoil among the peoples. There's just a sense in which: *God, everywhere I look, it's You. It's You, and it's Your power and Your presence.*

I love verse 8:

They who dwell in the ends of the earth stand in awe of Your signs [which is what we were just talking about]; **You make the dawn and the sunset shout for joy.**

David is saying, "God, everywhere I look, all I see is a reminder of You and Your awesomeness and Your power and Your majesty. Your signs are everywhere—from one end of the earth to the other. How is it possible anyone could miss Your signature in this world?" He talks about the joy of the sunrise and the sunset.

I'm a big sunset person. Sunrises are nice; but just the way I'm wired, I'm gearing up for the day and I really don't sit there and take them in. But I love the evening. The day is over, my energy is spent, and you just kind of settle in. I think in Nebraska we have fabulous sunsets, and it seems like every one of them is different. I imagine God up there painting each day's picture of a sunset and at the end of that He says, "Hey, check that one out." It makes me happy; it makes me joyful. I look at that, and I say, "God, that one is awesome!"

But what stuns me is the reality that that God, who is so big and so beautiful and I see His presence everywhere, is the God who has forgiven my sin. It's the same God who invites me into His courtyard, into His house, into His temple and says, "Know Me. I chose you. Know Me; walk with Me." I don't know how to respond to that. I have no words for that. I'm just stunned. I'm speechless—that a God so grand, so big, so powerful, invites me to come into His most intimate place and to know Him. That's what David's talking about there.

Now I would ask the question, "How is it possible that you could see a sunrise and a sunset and somehow not see God in that?" But I also understand I'm looking through redeemed eyes. I'm looking through a heart that has been changed by the power of God. And because of that I see everything differently. It looks very different to one who has not experienced the redemption or the salvation of God.

Again, I was reminded of that in Hitchens' book. You remember one of the claims was that his conclusions are on the basis of science. Well, this is about as close as it gets to science in the book. He says, "If you will devote a little time to studying the staggering photographs taken by the Hubble telescope, you will be scrutinizing things that are far more awesome and mysterious and beautiful—and more chaotic and overwhelming and forbidding [at this point we're right with him]—than any creation story." (p. 8)

He goes on to say, "I shall be surprised if you can still go on gaping at Moses and his unimpressive "burning bush."...Now at last you can be properly humble in the face of your maker, which turns out not to be a "who" but a process of mutation." (pp. 8-9)

Now he invites us here to take a careful look at the pictures from the Hubble telescope. So we're going to do that. Up on the screen are a couple of shots that were taken from the Hubble telescope. As he looks at those shots, which are fabulous—they're far more wonderful than anything we could have imagined—his conclusion is that is so fabulous it has to dismiss the idea of a creator. Is anybody following that logic? Dismissing the Creator, the alternative is what? That we believe it's by chance through mutation.

I've got to tell you, I'm a man of faith but that is a leap of faith I can't even imagine. How can you look at those pictures and not see the signature of God everywhere? How is it a logical conclusion that those pictures are so fabulous it means we have to dismiss the idea of a Creator?

Hitchens goes on to say those pictures are so fabulous that how could we possibly believe that God spoke to Moses in a burning bush? Is anybody tracking the logic of that? What does one have to do with the other? Does he even understand what that text is about? Does he understand what the point of the burning bush was and why God appeared as fire? Does he think God was trying to pull His most dramatic special effect at that moment, and it somehow comes up short of those pictures?

I mean, there isn't even a shred of logic or reason in all of that. If that's his claim that science dismisses God, I have to say, "I'm sorry, all I see is God!" For most of history, no one has been able to see those pictures but God, which leads you to believe God created that because He likes it that way. Even when we could not see it, God could see it, and He said, "I like that. That's why I made it." It's a beautiful picture of God.

What verse 8 is talking about is when we look at the world through redeemed eyes, everything looks different. I see God in the majesty of a mountain. I see God in the beauty of a flower. I see God in the sunrises and the sunsets. I see God in the beauty of what He has made. I think to myself, *How can you possibly miss this?*

But Hitchens, with an unredeemed heart, sees the rotation of the earth, he sees gases, he sees chance, he sees fate, but he doesn't see God. It all started with the atonement, which dramatically changes how we see everything.

Verse 9:

You visit the earth and cause it to overflow; You greatly enrich it; the stream of God is full of water; You prepare their grain, for thus You prepare the earth.

Understand in an ancient world, year by year they would live off the harvest and the livestock. They understood that if the harvest didn't come in, if God didn't bring rain, there was a likelihood that they would perish before the year's end. It's hard for us to identify with that in any way. We have years and years and years of drought, but the grocery store is full of food. We just don't think that way. But they understood: *If God doesn't show up and visit the earth this year, we will die.*

That's why the Feast of Tabernacles was such a dramatic feast. There was a sense in which God showed up again this year, and we have another year of bounty. That's what they're talking about. **"You visit the earth and cause it to overflow."** It must have been a great harvest. **"You greatly enrich it; the stream of God is full of water."** If you can imagine in an ancient barren culture seeing the dry riverbed and contrast that to a river that's full of water and you say, "God, You showed up and the river is full. We're going to live again this year."

Verse 10:

You water its furrows abundantly, You settle its ridges, You soften it with showers, You bless its growth.

Farming is done in similar ways today. It's about trying to maximize the water with furrows and ridges. David is saying, "We did our part, and You did Your part, and You bless its growth."

Verse 11:

You have crowned the year with Your bounty, and Your paths drip with fatness.

I love that imagery. “Paths” is the Hebrew word for wagon tracks. What he’s saying is, “If you could imagine the bounty is so big that they take the cart in and out of the field over and over again to bring in the bounty, and it makes these ruts or these tracks. And even though the ruts are deep, the bounty is so great that the grain is spilling over the wagon into the ruts and the ruts are filled with the overflow.” That’s how much God has brought in, and that’s the picture there.

Verses 12-13:

The pastures of the wilderness drip, and the hills gird themselves with rejoicing. The meadows are clothed with flocks and the valleys are covered with grain; they shout for joy, yes, they sing.

David is looking around at God’s provision, at God’s bounty, and they’re celebrating the harvest coming in. All he can see is God. “God, You established the mountains. God, You brought forth the rain. God, You brought forth the grain. You bring the dew in the morning.” Everywhere he looks, there is God. And that’s the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles—the wonder of God in creation.

One of the things I love about creation is it gives us a sense of God’s power. It gives us a sense of God’s awesomeness. When I look at a sunset and I see God’s signature on it, I’m reminded: *I don’t care what I’m facing today, I’m reminded by that sunset God is big enough for it. God has unlimited power. There’s nothing beyond His ability to handle. Everywhere I look, all I see is God and His goodness and His power.*

But I’m also reminded I see that through redeemed eyes. It’s all flowing out of the Atonement—that I came to God recognizing I was overwhelmed with my sin. I had nowhere else to go. God, in His grace and mercy through the blood of Jesus, covered my sin. And on that basis, He invites me to come into His court, into His house, and into His most intimate place.

It’s from that perspective that I see all of life. Because of that, every day is filled with a sense of mystery. It’s filled with a sense of wonder. I don’t know where God is going to show up. I don’t know what He’s going to do today. But life is always fresh and it’s new and it’s dynamic.

I look at some of the people around me, and all they have is 8 to 5 and they’re cranking it out. They’re miserable and they’re surviving for the week. And then I think, *That’s no way to live. Can’t you see God? He’s everywhere. Can’t you possibly understand that this God that is so magnificent is inviting you to come into His presence that He might satisfy you, that He might know you, that He might forgive you?* I think to myself, *How can you not see that?*

This isn’t a problem of the intellect. This isn’t a problem with science and reason. This is a problem at the most intimate part of our being—of a willingness to surrender to God as God or not.

I’m convinced if I had a week to talk to Mr. Hitchens, I wouldn’t make a dent. His problem is not his intellect. His problem is not science, and it’s not reason. The book makes that abundantly clear. As a matter of fact, he was on a talk show last week. At the end of the interview I told Patti, “You know, if I was asked to give the rebuttal to what he just said, all I would say is, ‘The interview speaks for itself.’” It was so foolish. It was so nonsensical, nothing else needed to be said. You

think, *How could that possibly make sense to anyone?* But if you do not have a redeemed heart, then life looks different. Everything looks different.

It's a reminder that we cannot argue people into the kingdom of God. You probably have people you work with, you probably have friends or family members or people you go to school with and you think, *How can they not see this? If they understood that the sunset is so gorgeous and that very God is saying, "Come and know Me," how can you not respond to that?*

But their eyes have been blinded to the truth. Without a redeemed heart, none of that makes sense. You explain it over and over and over again, and it's like it's not making a dent. There's a reminder in that that I can't argue anyone into the kingdom of God. Ultimately, until God changes their heart, it just looks differently.

One of the great concerns in our culture today is our country is being divided more and more and more and more along political lines and political issues. I see churches getting on the momentum of this, and church after church after church is dividing out on this basis. I think this is a monumental mistake. We are not a political entity. We are the people of God. We're not Republican; we're not Democrat. We are about the power of God atoning our sin through the death of Jesus, and through that He changes our perspective on the world.

You can argue with the people you work with about abortion and homosexuality and all the hot button issues of our day; but until their hearts have been redeemed, they just don't see it the same way. They think what you say makes no sense to them. And if we utter one single word that causes them to be less likely to hear the story of God's redemption, we have made a strategic mistake.

We need to do everything possible to open up a very loving, compassionate discussion about the life-changing power of Jesus, because that's the only thing, at the end of the day, that's really going to bring about a change in perspective. Once you have been atoned by the blood of Jesus, everything looks different.

There's also a reminder in this psalm to us that we can't be complacent. This morning we gather together as the people of God to worship. Did any of us really stop to think about what a staggering reality that is? We're scrambling around at home; we're grabbing our stuff; we're slipping in the door. Do we realize what's happening here—people overwhelmed with our sin and guilt have been invited, chosen by God, to have our sins forgiven and to enter into His most holy place and to know Him? And we are reminded what this cost Him—that there are times that truth is just so overwhelming we're stunned. We're speechless. There's nothing we can do. At that moment, I can't clap. I can't sing. I can't do anything, but just try and take it in.

To me that's a part of what creation does for me as I see the beauty and the wonder of God. And I remind myself, *How is it possible that the God that made this with the spoken word is the same God that knows me, the same God that atoned for my sin that invites me into His presence and says, "I want to know you forever."* I don't even have words for that. I can't even quite understand how that is possible. It is this unimaginable message of grace.

Since David opens this psalm reminding us that he is speechless in the presence of God, we thought that would be a good way to close the message. Rather than me talking to God, let's just be quiet before God. So what we're going to do is we're going to bring down the house lights, and we're going to roll some of the pictures taken by the Hubble telescope. And in quietness, what I'm inviting you to do is to look at the signature of God in what God has made and remind yourself

that's the God who died for you. That's the God that invites you into His presence. That's the God that says, "Come and know Me." Once again, be stunned, be speechless, before such a God.

¹*god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Christopher Hitchens, (Twelve: New York, 2007).

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