

July 23/24, 2005

Celebrating the Works of God

Psalm 111

Pastor Bryan Clark

We have a saying: “Talk is cheap.” And we all know what that means. It means that it’s easy to say anything, but that doesn’t necessarily make it so.

Most of you are aware of the fact that several years ago I came up with the crazy idea that I wanted to buy a young horse and train it myself. So I started looking around and I had pretty specific ideas about what I wanted and I couldn’t find anything locally. So I did what’s unusual for me—I actually got on the internet and started looking around and found exactly what I wanted in Victor, Montana. Victor is clear on the western side of Montana. I’ve talked enough about this horse that I thought you might want to see a picture of it—so that is him. I called the owner (her name was Debbie) and we talked for 30 minutes, maybe 45 minutes. I asked all the questions and I told her I was a beginner and we processed through all of that. Everything sounded really good.

I then talked to some friends of mine that are much more “horsey” than I am, and they thought it sounded good. But there was still some uneasiness, because I understand talk is cheap. She could say whatever she wanted to say to sell me this horse from over 1,000 miles away. So I started looking around on the internet and I actually found websites for a number of ranches that surrounded her ranch. I got the phone numbers and I called these people and asked them every question I could think of about her, about her reputation, about her horses. And actually what I learned is that she has a stellar reputation, both as a person and as a horse person. That’s what I needed to hear, so I wrote the check and purchased the horse. Now one question would be: How do you get a horse from western Montana back to Lincoln, Nebraska? It’s not like they’ll ship it UPS or something. Well, that’s for another sermon...to be continued.

We understand a person can say anything, but that doesn’t necessarily make it so. There needs to be some sort of a track record—evidence that says there’s credibility to those words.

Well, the fact is God has promised us unimaginable things. And we believe that. But we would also have to be honest to say there are days when it’s harder to believe than other days. And oftentimes in the most difficult circumstances of life, we struggle sometimes and wonder, *Is this really true?*

This morning as you walked through these doors, some of you—maybe many of you—walked through the doors with a burden on your heart. You’re going through something very difficult. It might have to do with your health. It might have to do with your marriage. It might have to do with a wayward child. It might have to do with your job or finances—whatever it is. Sometimes in the midst of those struggles it’s hard to understand: Where is God in all of this? And how can I be sure that what God has said is true? Because sometimes it’s harder to see than other times.

Today in Psalm 111 the psalmist will help us to answer that question. Nobody knows who wrote Psalm 111. Nobody knows for sure the timeframe. Most scholars think it was written after the Babylonian captivity, which would be basically at the end of the Old Testament. So it was one of the later psalms to be penned.

One of the unique things about Psalm 111 is the way it’s organized. It’s actually a very beautiful piece of poetry, but the translation from Hebrew to English loses that. It’s organized around an acrostic through the Hebrew alphabet. It has the opening line, “Praise the LORD” which is the Hebrew “Hallelujah,” followed by 22 statements that all play off the Hebrew alphabet. To put it into English just to make it a little bit more simple, the first statement would start with an A, the second statement starts with a B, the third statement starts with a C...right through the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

One of the things worth noting here is that God is a very creative, artsy God. All you have to do is look at creation and look at nature around us and you recognize this is a very artsy, creative God. And that's a very important thing to understand about God. The same is true when you read through the Scriptures. There's a tendency to think that all that matters are the facts, and we can lose sight of the fact that the Bible is written in different genres and in very poetic, creative fashion. This psalm is an example of a part of Scripture that's very beautifully, poetically artsy in its orientation. And that tells us something about God and His person and His character that we need to remember.

It starts with:

Praise the LORD! (v. 1a, *NASB)

Again, that's the Hebrew "Hallelujah," followed by what is in essence a vow:

I will give thanks to the LORD with all my heart... (v. 1b)

Remember two weeks ago from Psalm 95 we said that a characteristic of a worshiper is someone who has a thankful heart. Those people that fail to be consistent worshipers tend to be grumblers. But those people that are faithful worshipers cultivate a heart of thanksgiving. And David makes his vow, his commitment, that that's what he wants to be. He will thank the Lord with all his heart.

In the company of the upright and in the assembly. (v. 1c)

Now that's a very interesting statement as it relates to us as a church here. Two weeks ago I reminded us that we have what we call two primary environments that we feel are necessary for people to grow spiritually. One is a small group we call a LifeGroup—a place of encouragement, a place where you're known, a place where there's accountability. It's to prevent you from falling through the cracks.

But we also understand that a LifeGroup isn't enough. There's also the gathering of the body together for corporate worship. From Genesis to Revelation there's this consistent call for the people of God to come together and worship.

Well, that's exactly the statement that the psalmist makes when he says "in the company of the upright." That Hebrew word translated "company" is a word that means a close group of friends. It's a group of friends that in this case are upright—in other words, those who share the same values, those who are committed to God. There's a sense of community that the psalmist experiences with these people.

But that's not the whole picture. He wants that group to gather together with the larger group. The word "assembly" means the congregation—the large group. And so his LifeGroup together with the whole group come together to worship; that's exactly what he says.

Great are the works of the LORD... (v. 2a)

That word "great" is the Hebrew word that means awe-inspiring. The works of the Lord cause us to have a sense of wonder, a sense of awe at the greatness of God.

They are studied by all who delight in them. (v. 3a)

That's an interesting statement there. "Studied" is the Hebrew word that means to ponder, to investigate, to take note. The word "delight" is a word that means to celebrate. But it's more than that; it actually means to proclaim—to celebrate in the sense of proclaiming this. What the psalmist is in essence saying is that the works of God, for those who study them, who investigate them, who ponder them—they will be so struck with the awe-inspiring works of God that they will desire to proclaim these. They want people to know them.

If you were to go to Cambridge, England you would find a scientific laboratory called the Cavendish Laboratory. It was named after the 18th century English chemist and physicist Sir Henry Cavendish. What would strike you is, as you're entering into this scientific laboratory, engraved in the stone above the door are the words of Psalm 111, verse 2: "Great are the works of the LORD; they are studied by all who delight in them." It was intended to be the mandate or the standard for scientists—that if they have an open heart and an open mind to pursue God, they will see the awe-inspiring works of God through science—to the extent that they will proclaim them, they will celebrate them.

It's important to recognize that there is no conflict between the Bible and science; as a matter of fact, they are best friends. If you have a heart and a mind to pursue truth, when you study and ponder the works of God, you conclude this is an awe-inspiring God. And you can't help but proclaim the wonder of what He has made.

Perhaps some of you are familiar with the name Antony Flew. Antony Flew is considered over the last many years to be the most influential atheist. He comes out of Great Britain and is today in his 80s. For years he engaged in debate with Gary Habermas, a professor at Liberty University, in multiple forums and venues. Habermas would argue for the existence of God, for the reliability of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and Antony Flew would debate that. But somewhere along the way something happened in Antony Flew's heart, and in September of 2004 he picked up the phone and called Gary Habermas and he told him that now in his 80s he was changing his position from atheism to theism.

Now imagine this: for 80 years he has held the position and been one of the most influential spokesmen for that position. Now in the twilight of his life he's making a radical shift. He is saying, "For 80 years I have been wrong." What led him to that conclusion? In his own words he said, "In recent years the sophistication of science has caused me to conclude there must be intelligent design behind the universe." He said, "With what we now know, to believe this all happened by chance is completely undefensible. There has to be intelligent design." In his own words he said, "I had to go where the evidence leads." That's a man of remarkable integrity in his intellect to say, "The evidence is clear; I have been wrong for these 80 years."

That's exactly what the psalmist is saying. If you have the integrity to investigate, to ponder, to study the magnificence of the works of God, you will see that He is an awe-inspiring God, to the extent that you will not only want to celebrate it but to proclaim it.

The psalmist says:

Splendid and majestic is His work... (v. 3b)

You learn something about the person of God through the works of God—that He is splendid or glorious and majestic.

And His righteousness endures forever. (v. 3c)

Now that's an interesting statement. When you think about the works of God you don't tend to think about the terminology of righteousness. When we're talking about the creation of the universe and the sun and the moon and the stars and all of that, typically "righteousness" is not a term used for that. It's a term used more when you talk about God's awe-inspiring works in the lives of His people. And here the psalmist is making a shift. We've had it in our mind that the works of creation are awe-inspiring. And they are. But perhaps the greatest work God has ever done is in the lives of His people—to redeem sinful people to make them stand rightly before God.

And that's exactly where he goes with the psalm:

He has made His wonders to be remembered... (v. 4a)

The word “remembered” there is a word that means to memorialize. And now we’re clearly of the understanding that he’s speaking here about His works among His people. When you read the Old Testament it’s very obvious God intended for His awe-inspiring works to be memorialized among His people.

For example, you look at Leviticus chapter 23. God established the Hebrew yearly calendar around these feasts and festivals that celebrated His goodness and faithfulness to His people so they wouldn’t forget that. One example of that would be the Passover. Every year He wanted the people to remember His redemption of delivering them from bondage in Egypt, and the Passover was a memorial to that.

When you read through the first few chapters of the Book of Joshua you find that when the Hebrew people crossed the Jordan River headed to Jericho that God said, “I want you to take these stones and I want you to pile them up beside the river.” And He said very specifically, “So that when your children and your children’s children come along and say, “What is that thing?” I want you to tell them what I did for you today.” It’s a memorial—because our tendency is to forget. God established memorials all along the way so that we would not forget His track record of faithfulness to His people.

Well, the same moves into the New Testament. Communion is a memorial. As a matter of fact, it’s almost the exact language Jesus used: “I want you to do this in memorial to Me.” Our tendency is to forget. After a while we start to become guilty of a sense of pride and self-righteousness, and we forget that we’re sinners saved by grace and we forget what our salvation is all about. So we have to be reminded on a continual basis through the elements of communion. Baptism is a memorial. It’s a reminder that God is in the business of remodeling. He is in the business of renewing. He has given us a new life in Christ, and baptism symbolizes through the death, burial and resurrection of Christ that our old life is put to death and we are raised to a newness of life. And every time we see a baptism we’re reminded that this is true.

As has already been mentioned, if you have not been to a baptismal service in the last year, I couldn’t urge you more to come back tonight. You will be dramatically reminded that God is in the business of changing lives. You will be affirmed; you will be encouraged; you will be excited. Fifty-one people ranging in age from 81 to 11 will demonstrate that Jesus has radically changed their lives. As a matter of fact, if you serve somewhere in a ministry area and you find yourself lacking for some enthusiasm, if you feel like “I’ve kind of lost my passion; I’m just going through the motions; I’m cranking it out”—I guarantee you if you come back tonight that will change. You will be reminded in dramatic fashion, *This is why we do what we do*. Baptism is a memorial. We need to constantly be reminded of the awe-inspiring works of God among His people.

The LORD is gracious and compassionate. (v. 4b)

Now this is an interesting statement because it’s made in the context of the Old Covenant, of the Old Testament, if you will. Oftentimes when we think about God in the Old Testament we think of the Old Testament as law; the New Testament as grace; in the Old Testament God is kind of angry and judgmental; in the New Testament He’s nice and loving. But that simply isn’t true. That isn’t an accurate picture at all. And what the psalmist is saying is that if you look back at God’s track record, if you look at the memorials of His faithfulness, the only conclusion you could come to is that God is gracious and compassionate. That’s the testimony of His track record.

It is true if you read through the Old Testament there were a handful of times when God poured out His discipline on His people. But for every one of those, there are hundreds of examples of God pouring out His grace on an undeserving people.

The problem is we tend to remember the negative over the positive. If this morning ten people complimented you and one person criticized you, what would you remember? You would think about it all day long—the one criticism—because that’s the way we’re wired; that’s the way we tend to be. And we could become that same way with God. There are those occasions where God disciplined His people. But far outweighing those are the memorials of God’s grace and God’s compassion.

We often tend to be guilty of selective memory. What I mean by that is we often tend to remember the negative and we forget the positive. We look back and we look at this negative and that negative and this negative. I guarantee you, if you have selective memory you will be a grumbler, and you will despair and struggle with anger and what it means to walk by faith. But a full memory is recognizing, *Yes, there are those things in our lives that are hard to understand, but there is this overwhelming track record of God’s grace and compassion that far outweigh the struggles*—if we remember it that way, if we have our memorials.

It’s almost as if the psalmist is anticipating someone saying, “Well, tell us a couple of those examples of His grace and compassion.” So he records three of them.

He has given food to those who fear Him... (v. 5a)

He certainly was referring to God’s provision of manna from heaven to the children of Israel. You can find it in Exodus 16; you can find it in Numbers chapter 11. Literally every day that the Hebrew people were in the wilderness God provided food from heaven. There wasn’t one day where they ever had to wonder, *Will we have our needs met today?* Now it wasn’t a five-course meal, but it was adequate. It was their daily bread. And God provided for them faithfully day in and day out, month in and month out, year in and year out, as a testimony of His grace and compassion.

He will remember His covenant forever. (v. 5b)

It’s talking about the covenant made to Abraham and then re-upped several times through David and others. In essence, the covenant was God’s promise that: “Abraham, because of you and your people’s inability to keep the covenant, I promise I will shed My blood to make it right. That’s the basis by which you know you can believe that My promises will be true.” And that is unfolded through years, and of course the ultimate fulfillment of that is in Jesus Christ. But even at this point when the psalmist is yet looking forward to the fulfillment of that, he sees enough evidence to know that God will be faithful to His word.

He has made known to His people the power of His works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. (v. 6)

The heritage of the nations is the promised land. He’s saying, “God promised you a land and God delivered. And the evidence of His power is known to everyone.”

Sometimes we forget that when God did these miracles for the Hebrew people it became known throughout the land. One classic example of that is in the early chapters of Joshua, when the spies go into Jericho and they encounter Rahab. And in the process of discussing who they are, Rahab says, “I know who you are; and more than that, I know who your God is. The stories of your God’s greatness and power precede you. As a matter of fact, when we heard the things that your God was able to do, our hearts melted because we knew there was no way to defeat a God like that.”

You have to understand that when God did these miracles, the stories spread like wildfire and other nations knew, *This is a God of remarkable power. This is a God of fame.* As a matter of fact, in the Psalms it actually refers to God as a God of fame. We’re going to close the service this morning by singing a song about God’s fame. Now in our culture, we think of fame as celebrity. That’s not what it means. It means God is a God of reputation. God is a God of renown. God is a God whose story

precedes Him because of His greatness. These are three examples of God's grace and compassion to His people—all having to do with the importance of memorials, of making sure that we don't lose sight of God's track record of faithfulness.

How do we know that we can believe God when He speaks? Well, there are thousands of years of a track record of faithfulness, of graciousness, of compassion. But I don't think it's just limited to that. I think there's also a lesson in here that we as individuals need to do the same. I need to have my own memorials to God's faithfulness, because the reality is I have a tendency to forget that. And the time when I need to remember it most, those are the times when I tend to most easily forget. Memorials aren't just things in my mind. I think memorials are things that are more tangible—that actually remind me of God's history of faithfulness.

I brought three examples this morning—these would be three of mine. Several years ago after reading through the Old Testament multiple times, it just became so obvious to me that God knows we have a propensity to forget and we need to put stuff in our lives that cause us to remember. One of those for me is this Bible. This was my grandfather's Bible; it was printed in 1911. It actually belonged to another member of the family and was handed down to him; he handed it down to me. This reminds me that I have a rich spiritual heritage—that I can look back into my family heritage and see the faithfulness of God over and over again. My grandfather was one of the five founding men of the first Berean Church in North Platte, Nebraska. Now some 60 whatever years it is later, I can look at over 50 churches across the country and I can see God's hand of faithfulness. It reminds me that we need to keep taking big steps of faith. This reminds me there's a track record of God's faithfulness. And so remembering that, I can take my own steps of faith. But I need to be reminded of that, because sometimes I forget.

This second memorial happens to be the biography of my dad's life—actually it's my mom and dad's life. This happens to be a special copy for me because my dad signed it about four weeks before he died. Basically this is the story of the first half of my life. The first half of my life was in a context of extreme suffering that to this day makes no sense. I still have hundreds of questions about those days that I don't have answers for. In the midst of those things it's hard to figure out, *Where is God?* and *This can't make any sense* and *How do I believe God is good and faithful when everything in my circumstances seems to scream the opposite?* But once you get away from it a little bit and begin to look back on it, it isn't that hard to see God's hand of faithfulness in the midst of that over those years. I would say a major part of who I am and what I believe today was forged in those years in the first half of my life. I don't want to forget those lessons. I don't know what God might have for me tomorrow. But if God asks me to suffer tomorrow I want to remember the lessons that I learned growing up. This book reminds me of that. This sits right across from my desk in my office here at the church.

The last one is one probably many of you are familiar with. This is that breathing monster they make you breathe into after you have surgery. This reminds me of what I learned when I had my heart surgery. Before my surgery I would have said to you, "I understand and believe that God has a purpose to my life." But I would have to say post-surgery, the intensity of that belief has been ratcheted up several notches. I will never forget Dr. Meckel, my cardiologist, coming out of the heart cath looking me in the eye saying, "Bryan, there is no human explanation for why you are alive." Dr. Meckel is a believer; he knew exactly what he was saying: "You're alive because of the grace of God, because you should be dead." Well I understand that I am here today because I have an assignment; I have a purpose. And I need to be diligent about that purpose—I don't want to ever forget that. This sits on my desk at home and reminds me that I'm here with an assignment and I need to stay focused on that assignment.

I don't know what your memorials would be. I just know that you need them. You need memorials that remind you when you need to be reminded the most that God has a track record of faithfulness and that He will be faithful to you even in the midst of circumstances that don't make any sense.

Well, the psalmist goes on. Verse 7:

The works of His hands are truth and justice...

Now, that again is an interesting statement. We don't typically use that terminology when referring to works. We don't talk about "His works are truth"...we talk about "His words are truth." Here the psalmist begins to intermingle the words of God with the works of God in such a way that they can't really be separated.

The works of His hands are truth and justice; all His precepts are sure. (v. 7b)

Now we know for positive he's mingling together the *words* of God with the *works* of God. His precepts are His instruction, His principles, His promises. What the psalmist is saying is that God's works flow out of His words. And His words are truth and justice; therefore His works are truth and justice. How do we know when God speaks that He can be trusted—that He isn't just a big talker? Well, for us there are thousands of years of evidence that God has been faithful. His works were a fulfillment of His words, and there's every reason to believe that God is faithful to keep His word.

They are upheld forever and ever; they are performed in truth and uprightness. He has sent redemption to His people... (vs. 8-9a)

God made promises to the children of Israel that He kept. Now if this psalm was written after the Babylonian captivity, you would have not only redemption out of Egypt, but then a successive redemption out of Babylonia, and of course a looking forward to the fulfillment of God's covenant promise to be redeemed from bondage and sin.

Of course we today as the readers have a much more fulfilled picture than the psalmist had, because the psalmist was still believing that God would keep His promise—that He would become flesh and shed His blood to atone for sin. We have experienced the fulfillment of that. We know that God did that. He did indeed become flesh, died on the cross in payment for sin, that those who place their faith in Jesus and His atoning work on the cross know forgiveness of sin and enter into a relationship with Him. We know He kept His redemptive promise, so we have several thousand years more than the psalmist had to affirm all the more: *Yes, God keeps His promise to redeem His people.*

He has ordained His covenant forever; Holy and awesome is His name. (v. 9b)

"Holy" means set apart; "awesome" means awe-inspiring. When the Bible talks about "name" it means the sum total of who that person is. So it's talking about the sum total of who God is: He's awesome; He's awe-inspiring; He's unlike any other; He's holy; He's set apart. What the psalmist is saying is if you look at the *works* of God and how they affirm the *words* of God, then you understand the *person* of God. And the only right conclusion would be to revere or to reverence such a God—which is exactly what he says in verse 10. Verse 10 is actually the application of the psalm.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom... (v. 10a)

The fear of the Lord is not: "I'm afraid of Him." The fear of the Lord is: "I revere Him; I reverence Him." If I understand that the works of God flow out of the words of God, which flow out of the character of God, then I understand that God is an awesome God, because I know His works are awe-inspiring; they're filled with grace and compassion. They are glorious and majestic. And so the more I understand the works of God, the more I am affirmed in the words of God and the more I revere the character of God. Therefore my view of God is such that I choose to believe His words and build my life upon them.

The psalmist is saying that is the beginning—the foundation stone of skilled living. The word “wisdom” basically means “skilled living.” How do I make sure in the midst of a confused culture that I make wise, skillful decisions? Well, it starts by my view of God. If I look at His works, if I believe His words, which affirms His character, then I say “Okay, then I’m going to walk His path; I’m going to believe Him; I’m going to walk according to His instruction.” When I make that choice, then I am on the track of skilled living.

A good understanding have all those who do His commandments... (v. 10b)

A “good understanding” could be translated “good success.” Those who study the works of God, affirm the words of God, which cultivates our view of God, will then choose to obey His commandments—will live skillfully, will experience success in our faith walk—because it all flows out of our confidence that what God says is true. The reality is God is not a big talker. God has made magnificent promises, but we can go back for thousands of years and see a track record of faithfulness that He does what He says. Therefore, I can believe that God will be faithful to fulfill His promises to me today.

Because that’s true and will endure as true forever, the psalmist closes by saying:

His praise endures forever. (v. 10c)

Because this will be true forever, then His people will praise Him forever.

I don’t know what is heavy on your heart this morning. I don’t know what the burden is that you carried in here this morning. But I do know this: If you become so myopic that all you see is today, you will struggle, you will doubt, you will despair.

But if you broaden your view and you begin to remember the track record of God’s faithfulness, you begin to look at the memorials for thousands of years and the memorials in your own life, you have every reason to believe that God will keep His promises to you—even though at times our circumstances don’t seem to make much sense.

If God has been faithful to His people without one evidence of ever not keeping His promise, what would cause you to think that you would be the first person in all of history that He would ever let down? Rather, His track record gives evidence that you have every reason today to believe He will keep His promise. Regardless of the circumstances, God will be true. His works affirm His words, affirm His character. If we believe that, that is the foundation stone upon which we build a skilled life of faith.

Our Father, we’re thankful that You are indeed a faithful God. Lord, we know today, no matter what we’re going through, You will be faithful. Lord, that isn’t just wishful thinking or religious talk. Lord, we have thousands of years of a track record that supports that statement. Your awe-inspiring works in the lives of your people are works that are glorious and majestic. Lord, I pray especially for those that are carrying a burden, that are going through a difficult struggle, that today they might be reminded of Your track record of faithfulness, that today they might have the faith to believe that You will be faithful now and forever. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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