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GOD IS GREAT AND HE IS GRACIOUS

Psalm 113

By

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God is Great and He is Gracious
Psalm 113

In 2007, British atheist Christopher Hitchens published, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* [Twelve Books]. It quickly shot to the top of the *New York Times* Bestseller List. According to Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_Is_Not_Great), "Hitchens contends that organised religion is '[v]iolent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism, tribalism, and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children', and that accordingly it 'ought to have a great deal on its conscience.'"

As a Bible-believing pastor, I would agree with many of Hitchens' criticisms of organized religion. In fact, I would argue that organized religion has been one of Satan's greatest tools to promote deception and to keep people from knowing the living and true God. But at the same time I believe that Hitchens makes a foolish error that he will regret throughout eternity when he asserts, "God is not great." In addition to reeking of arrogance, that assertion rests on Hitchens' irrational assumption that everything we see in the world and in the universe came out of nothing by sheer chance. But if God is the almighty Creator of the universe and if He governs it by His sovereign power, then He alone is great! Hitchens has confused the false gods of various religions with the living and true God.

Psalm 113 asserts the greatness of God (113:4-6): "The Lord is high above all nations; His glory is above the heavens. Who is like the Lord our God, who is enthroned on high ...?" It is safe to say that many of our troubles in the Christian life stem from the fact that (as J. B. Phillips put it) our God is too small. We need to get the biblical view of God high and exalted.

But if that were the only view of God given to us in the Bible, we would rightly fear to draw near to Him. God is mighty, but we are weak. He is holy, but we are sinful. He knows everything, but we don't. He is eternal and not subject to death, but we are time-bound and vulnerable to accidents and disease.

So, thankfully, Psalm 113 presents another side of God. Not only is He great, but also He is gracious (113:7, 9): “He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap.... He makes the barren woman abide in the house as a joyful mother of children.” And so, as Derek Kidner aptly titles this psalm (*Psalms 73-150* [IVP], p. 401), there is “Nothing too great for Him, no one too small.” The message of this gem of a psalm is,

We should always praise God because He is great and He is gracious to the helpless person that calls on Him.

This is the first of six psalms (113-118) in the Psalter called “the Egyptian Hallel” (Hallel means praise). As Kidner explains (*ibid.*), “Only the second of them (114) speaks directly of the Exodus, but the theme of raising the downtrodden (113) and the note of corporate praise (115), personal thanksgiving (116), world vision (117) and festal procession (118) make it an appropriate series to mark the salvation which began in Egypt and will spread to the nations.” The Jews sang the first two psalms before the Passover meal and the other four afterwards. So these were probably the songs that Jesus and the apostles sang in the upper room on the night that He was betrayed (Matt. 26:30).

The psalm falls into two main sections, the call to praise the Lord (1-3); and, the causes for praising the Lord (4-9), namely, that He is great (4-5) and He is gracious (6-9). There is an unstated but strongly implied action point: If you are poor and helpless, call upon the great God to be gracious to you.

1. The call to praise the Lord: His servants are to praise Him at all times (113:1-3).

“Praise the Lord! Praise, O servants of the Lord, praise the name of the Lord. Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth and forever. From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised” (vv. 1-3). There are four lessons here:

A. We need to be stirred up to praise the Lord.

Three times in the first verse the psalmist exhorts us to praise the Lord. John Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], 4:331) explains that this repetition is not superfluous, given how cold and callous we are in practicing it. He points out that we all acknowledge that we were created to praise God's name, and yet we often disregard

His glory. Thus the psalmist repeats the exhortation so that we will be more fervent and faithful in praising the Lord.

Genuine praise of God does not mean that we go around saying, "Praise the Lord" all the time. Rather, it is a response to thinking about who God is and what He has done, as revealed in His Word. While praise by its very nature is somewhat spontaneous, it also can be cultivated as we deliberately meditate on God's greatness and glory. If (like me) you must admit that you do not adequately praise the Lord (as we saw in Psalm 106:2, "Who can show forth all His praise?"), the place to start is to spend more time meditating on God as revealed in His Word.

One other thought: if you admit that you do not praise God often enough or fervently enough, it's probably true that you are not enjoying Him enough. C. S. Lewis pointed out (*Reflections on the Psalms* [Harcourt, Brace, and World], p. 95, cited by John Piper, *Desiring God* [Multnomah Books, 1996] p. 49), "I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation." If we delight in a beautiful sunset, we want to extol its beauty to others. Our enjoyment of it spontaneously overflows into praise. Our enjoyment of who God is and what He has done for us will also erupt in heartfelt praise.

B. The only ones who can praise God are His servants.

"Servants of the Lord" (v. 1) refers either to the entire nation as God's chosen servants (Isa. 41:8-9) or to individuals in the nation who had experienced God's redemption (Ps. 34:22). Sometimes it referred to the priests who served God in the tabernacle (Ps. 134:1). But here it probably refers to individual Israelites (H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms* [Baker], p. 790).

In New Testament terms, since we all are believer-priests, members of God's chosen nation (1 Pet. 2:9), all believers are servants of the Lord. In other words, being a servant of the Lord is not something that a few of God's people volunteer for: "I volunteered to serve on the building committee." Or, "I serve the Lord by teaching Sunday school." Rather, it is something that *all* of God's people are by virtue of the fact that we have been bought by the blood of Christ. And a major part of our service for the Lord is

to praise His name. Derek Kidner puts it (p. 401), "There is point in specifying the Lord's *servants* and His *name*, since worship to be acceptable must be more than flattery and more than guess-work. It is the loving homage of the committed to the Revealed." And so if you know Christ as Savior and Lord, you are His servant and part of your service every day is to praise His name.

C. The object of our praise is the Lord Himself as revealed in His Word.

The *name* of the Lord (repeated 3 times in vv. 1-3) refers to all that God is and all that He has done in His works of creation and redemption (see Willem VanGemeren, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 5:107-108). "LORD," which occurs five times in the first three verses (eight times in this short psalm) translates the Hebrew name for God, *Yahweh*. It stems from the Hebrew verb, *to be*. The only place in the Bible where this is explained is when God revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush. Moses asked the Lord what he should reply when the Jews asked him, "What is God's name who sent you to us?" God replied (Exod. 3:14), "'I AM WHO I AM'; and He said, 'Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

James Boice (*Psalms* [Baker], 3:922-924) explains that this story reveals several important facts about God. First, He is *a person*, not an abstract philosophic idea. He revealed Himself to Moses by speaking to him. Second, *God is self-existent*. Nothing caused Him or brought Him into being. Third, *God is self-sufficient*. He does not need the angels or humans or anything else. We can't contribute anything to Him that He is lacking. Fourth, *God is eternal*. He has always been and He will always be. Fifth, *God is unchangeable*. He never differs from Himself. "What he is today he will be tomorrow" (*ibid.*, p. 924). Thus, as Dr. Boice points out, we can trust God to be as He reveals Himself to be. And, this also means that God is inescapable. "He will not go away." If you ignore Him now, you will not ignore Him when you stand before Him in eternity!

One other incident that is especially important in considering what it means to praise *the name* of the Lord is Moses' request that God show him His glory. The Lord replied (Exod. 33:19), "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you; and I will be gracious to whom I

will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion." Then, as Moses called upon the name of the Lord, He descended and stood there with Moses (Exod. 34:5), and said (34:6-7), "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations."

Briefly, note that when God revealed His name to Moses, it centered on His goodness and His sovereignty. Yet while extolling His compassion, grace, and love, God also mentioned His justice in punishing the guilty. The application for us is that we do not properly praise the name of the Lord if we focus on our "favorite" attributes to the neglect of the whole of who God has revealed Himself to be. If all you do is praise God for His love, but not for His sovereignty and His justice, you are not praising His name.

Thus, we need to be stirred up to praise the Lord. The only ones who can praise Him are His servants, whom He has redeemed. The object of our praise is the Lord Himself as revealed in His Word.

D. The time and place to praise the Lord are always and everywhere.

"Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth and forever. From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised" (vv. 2-3). God's praises should begin now and we will continue praising Him in heaven throughout eternity. We should hand off God's praises to our children and grandchildren, so that the chorus of praise continues until the Lord returns.

"From the rising of the sun to its setting" means that God should be praised not only in Israel, but all over the earth. As God says in Malachi 1:11, "'For from the rising of the sun even to its setting, My name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to My name, and a grain offering that is pure; for My name will be great among the nations,' says the Lord of hosts." As John Piper puts it (*Let the Nations be Glad!* [Baker Academic], second ed., p. 17), "Missions exists because

worship doesn't." Our aim should be to see the name of the Lord praised always all over the earth.

The psalmist then moves to why we should praise the Lord:

2. The causes for praising the Lord: He is great and He is gracious (113:4-9).

God is enthroned on high, but He humbles Himself to help those who are helpless, who cry out to Him.

- A. Praise God because He is great (113:4-5).

"The Lord is high above all nations; His glory is above the heavens. Who is like the Lord our God, who is enthroned on high ...?" These verses remind us of Isaiah's wonderful description of the Lord's greatness (Isa. 40:12-41:4). I can only cite a few verses:

Isa. 40:15, 17: "Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales; behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust. . . . All the nations are as nothing before Him, they are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless."

Isa. 40:18: "To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?" The prophet goes on to mock those who make and worship idols.

Isa. 40:25-26: "'To whom then will you liken Me that I would be his equal?' says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these stars, the One who leads forth their host by number, He calls them all by name; because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power, not one of them is missing."

The psalmist says that not only is the Lord high above all nations, but also, "His glory is above the heavens" (113:4). If you could travel at the speed of light, it would take you 8 minutes to get to the sun. It would take 33,000 years to get to the center of our galaxy, The Milky Way. The Milky Way belongs to a group of some 20 galaxies known as the Local Group. To cross the Local Group, you'd have to travel for 2 million years. The Local Group belongs to the vast Virgo Cluster, part of the even larger Local Supercluster, 500 million light-years across. To cross the entire universe (as we know it) at the speed of light would take about 20 billion years! God's glory is above all of that!

William Beebe was a worldwide explorer and a friend of President Theodore Roosevelt. Often when he visited the President, the two men would go outdoors at night to see who could first locate the Andromeda galaxy. Then as they gazed at the tiny smudge of distant starlight, one of them would recite, "That is the spiral galaxy of Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million galaxies. It is 750,000 light-years away. It consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our sun." After that thought had sunk in, Roosevelt would flash his toothy grin and say, "Now I think we're small enough! Let's go to bed." (*Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations*, by Paul Lee Tan [Assurance Publishers], # 2213) Knowing that God's glory is above the heavens puts us in our proper place!

When the psalmist says that God is enthroned on high, it points to His sovereignty. He rules over the entirety of His creation. Nothing happens apart from His sovereign will or permission. As Psalm 103:19 declares, "The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all." The psalmist goes on (113:6) to indicate that God has to stoop down to look on the heavens, let alone the things on this speck called earth!

This means, as Jeremiah proclaimed (32:17), "Ah Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You." Or, as Paul put it (Eph. 3:20), God "is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us."

So the psalmist says, "Praise God because He is great!" But if God were only great, we would cringe in fear and hesitate to approach Him. So the psalmist also affirms,

B. Praise God because He is gracious (113:6-9).

"Who is like the Lord our God" (v. 5), "Who humbles Himself to behold the things that are in heaven and on earth? He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of His people. He makes the barren woman abide in the house as a joyful mother of children. Praise the Lord!" (6-9).

Leupold comments (p. 791), "He has done two things, each of which seems to make the other impossible. He has first taken His seat so high that no one can match Him, yet He has regard for the lowliest of the low in that He 'looks down so far.'" Verses 7 & 8 are almost verbatim from the song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:8). Hannah was barren, but cried out to God for a son. In response, the Lord gave her Samuel, who became the great prophet. Hannah's song extols how God casts down those who are proud in their own strength, who rely on themselves, but He lifts up the needy and helpless who cry out to Him.

Mary, the mother of our Lord, echoes Hannah's song in her Magnificat (Luke 1:51-53), "He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble. He has filled the hungry with good things; and sent away the rich empty-handed." As Spurgeon put it (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 11:616), "When we think little of ourselves, God thinks much of us."

Derek Kidner observes (p. 402), "Verses 7 and 8 anticipate the great downward and upward sweep of the gospel, which was to go even deeper and higher than the *dust* and the throne of *princes*: from the grave to the throne of God (Eph. 2:5f.)." In other words, God isn't just in the business of lifting beggars from the physical ash heap and seating them with princes. He is also in the business of taking spiritual beggars from the ash heap of sin and seating them with His exalted Son at His right hand in heavenly places! God is infinitely great, but He is also gracious!

The psalm ends on a deliberate anticlimax, referring to the lone, barren woman whom God makes a joyful mother of children. It's a reference to Hannah, of course. But it also implies an action point for every reader:

3. The implied action point: If you are poor and helpless, call upon the great God to be gracious to you.

In Hannah's day, to be childless was a great disgrace and curse. And, there were no fertility drugs or clinics to help you conceive. All you could do was to cry out to the Lord. It is significant that when God called Abraham and promised to make of him a

great nation and to bless all nations through his descendants, He also gave him a barren wife. The same was true with Abraham's son, Isaac's wife, Rebekah (Gen. 25:21) and with his son, Jacob's wife, Rachel (Gen. 29:31). Sarah and Rebekah were in the line of Christ, but they were initially unable to conceive!

Why did God do that? He did it to show that we cannot save ourselves by our own strength or efforts. Salvation is *totally* of the Lord. He doesn't save those who are righteous or those who are strong. He saves sinners who are weak in themselves, but who cry out to Him for mercy. And the psalm ends with an individual barren woman to show that God is not just concerned with needy people in general, but with the individual. And He especially cares for individuals who have come to the end of their own strength. They are on the ash heap of life, unable to save themselves. When He saves them, He gets all the glory.

Conclusion

So, "Who is like the Lord our God?" No one! He alone is great, but also he is gracious to those who are poor and helpless. His greatness and His grace are supremely seen in that He sent His eternal Son into this sinful world. He took the form of a servant and was obedient to death on the cross, to pay the penalty for your sin (Phil. 2:5-11). Call upon Him to save you from your sin. Cry out to Him in your spiritual barrenness to fill you with His joy. In your weakness, rely on His strength. Praise His name from this time forth and forever!

Application Questions

1. List some practical applications that stem from getting a biblical view of God's greatness.
2. Why is it important to see that all Christians are the Lord's servants; hence, we don't volunteer to serve?
3. How can we avoid the imbalance of focusing on only our "favorite" attributes of God, rather than the totality of who He is?
4. How does the popular teaching of "self-esteem" go against the biblical emphasis on seeing yourself as weak and helpless?

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