

God Cares

Psalm 29

1 Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. 2 Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name; worship the Lord in holy splendor.

3 The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters. 4 The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.

5 The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon. 6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.

7 The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. 8 The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

9 The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!"

10 The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever. 11 May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!

Out at sea a storm gathers strength, moving across the waters with immense, uncontrollable power. It hits land, and trees snap like matchwood before it. Forests are stripped bare, and mountains shake. The whole earth is caught up in a great elemental convulsion.

It is a scene that arouses a mixture of terror, awe, and wonder: terror, because we know it can destroy us in an instant; awe, because this is totally out of our control; wonder, because we are confronted with something tremendous, majestic, utterly unfathomable.

The grandeur of the storm, the tempestuous energy of the waves, the ferocity of the wind—all are called upon as images, metaphors, evidence. God is like this, says the psalmist. God is in this—"the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters" (v. 3).

Some claim that this ancient psalm began as a Canaanite hymn to Baal. It is possible. The tempest is no respecter of religion and culture. Terror, awe, and wonder are universals, they know no boundaries.

Psalm 29 is a hymn to the power (raw power?) of God. The guiding image in the psalm is a thunderstorm that rolls off the Mediterranean Sea onto the coast of Syria-Palestine and then into the wilderness. Thunderstorms were thought to be the work of the Canaanite god, but here it is declared over and over again that the storm is "the voice of the Lord." Whether or not the hymn is against the Canaanite religion, the basic message: The Lord, the God of Israel, is all-powerful and the sovereign God above all beings in heaven and on earth!

Psalm 29, most critics agree, is a victory song. The Lord is a storm over the waters, a storm thundering onto the land—breaking the mighty cedars of Lebanon, shattering the mountains to the north, shaking the wilderness to the east.

But whatever the distant origins of this text, Psalm 29 is not some thinly disguised promotion for the pagan gods of thunder, fire, and rain. God, proclaimed here is no muscle-bound, testosterone-fueled, force of nature, bellowing incoherently above the storm. This is a psalm soaked in the life-giving paradox of the biblical revelation of God. It speaks of a being so majestic and transcendent that all creatures in all places are called upon to cry, "Glory!" (vv. 1, 2, 9), yet whose mighty power is also directed towards sustaining, affirming, and blessing human life (vv. 10, 11).

The psalm begins with a celestial vision of God worshiped by the heavenly congregation. Words like "glory," "holy," "strength," and "splendor" are used of the one at the center of the action. They remind us of a similar scene in Isaiah 6:3, where the seraphim call out to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory." It is a majestic vision that continues through the epiphany in the storm (vv. 3-9). To catch a glimpse of God in this way is to

experience awe. It is to be reminded that we inhabit a world that we did not make, that we are unable to control, and that we cannot dispose of as we wish.

The great Jewish thinker Abraham Heschel thought the recovery of a sense of awe was vital for our civilization: "Forget your sense of awe, let your conceit diminish your ability to revere, and the universe becomes a market-place for you." Awe is much more than a spiritual high, a religious trip, he wrote: "It's a way of understanding, insight into a meaning greater than ourselves."

God is majestic. God is mighty. God is awesome. This much the worshipers of Baal may know. But there is more to the self-revelation of God in Scripture than this, and it is good news. As Karl Barth put it, "God is not imprisoned by his own majesty." Instead of remaining remote from human experience, God has chosen to be alongside us as our redeemer and friend. In Isaiah God declares: "For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite" (Isa. 57:15). God above us. God with us. God in us and for us.

After the awesome revelation in the storm, the psalm ends, as it begins, around the throne of YHWH. And it is now clear that this glory and majesty are not intended to smash, subdue, and subject. They are directed toward men and women for their good and well-being: "May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!" (v. 11). The peace promised here is not some inner tranquillity or even a cessation of hostilities between warring parties. Shalom is more radical and far reaching than that. It is a social and political condition, a state of just and right relationships between people, and with God—a community united in the solidarity of love. God, who sits majestically enthroned above the flood (v. 10) turns all that glory, all that holiness, toward the human race. God is not imprisoned by majesty.

We understand something of the mystery of God in the central section of the psalm (vv. 3-9) where it is repeatedly stated that the means whereby His awesome power is exercised in "the voice of the Lord" (vv. 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9). This is not some primitive way of referring to inexplicable noise, however majestic or awe-inspiring. God's sound is not an animalistic roar or an elemental crash. It's a voice—personal, articulate, demanding, relational. But it is dynamic.

The term takes us right back to Genesis 1. In the beginning God said, "Let there be!" and there was. A word is spoken and things spring into being. When God speaks, God acts. To exist, to be, is to obey the command of creation. As Jacques Ellul has pointed out, God creates through that which is "primarily a means of relationship." From the very beginning, the majestic voice of the Lord is not just an explosion of energy. It is an invitation to a relationship.

Psalm 29 bears witness to God who speaks—creatively, articulately, and meaningfully—and who draws human beings into the conversation. It points to God is known to us as the Father who creates and sustains; the Son who redeems and saves; and the Holy Spirit that gifts and guides us. God who is transcendent and immanent, revealed in the earthquake and the still, small voice, present at Sinai and Bethlehem, Lord of heaven and earth. **Iwan Russell-Jones**

It is God, who is enthroned over the flood and over all, who is enthroned...forever and over always. It is God who cares for us and gives us true strength. May the Lord bless us also with true peace – not as we know peace or even as we wish to know peace, for our peace is always partial. No, this Trinity Sunday, may the Lord bless us with the care and perfect peace and joy God gives to us in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Hear our psalm in a slightly different way:

The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever.
The Lord gives strength to his people! The Lord blesses his people with peace!
Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name; worship the Lord in holy splendor.

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The Lord gives strength to his people! The Lord blesses his people with peace!
The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.

The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever.
The Lord gives strength to his people! The Lord blesses his people with peace!
The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.
The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of
Kadesh.

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The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his
temple all say, "Glory!"

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The Lord gives strength to his people! The Lord blesses his people with peace!

[David L. Bartlett (2013). Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary.
Westminster John Knox Press. Retrieved from <https://app.wordsearchbible.lifeway.com>]