

Psalms for a Summer Season: Psalm 111

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Date: 10 August 2025

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[0 : 00] The Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge has been at the very forefront of world scientific research since 1874.

! The electron and the neutron were first identified at the Cavendish.! Crick and Watson discovered the existence of DNA at the Cavendish.

The Cavendish Laboratory boasts over 30 Nobel Prize winners. Over the front door of the physics laboratory at Cavendish are inscribed the words, The works of the Lord are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein.

Over one of the foremost scientific research institutes in the world are emblazoned the words of Psalm 111 verse 2, a stark reminder to us all that Christianity provided the foundation for all the greatest scientific discoveries of our modern age.

For some reason, Psalm 111 doesn't feature in most people's favorite Psalms. Perhaps it's because it lacks the tenderness of Psalm 23 or the beauty of Psalm 8, the challenge of Psalm 67 or the majesty of Psalm 100.

[1 : 29] But in many ways, its exclusion is inexplicable because it is full of the praise of God for all His glorious works.

It tells no story. Rather, it states in simple and clear form the majesty of God. We stand in awe of this psalm. There is no other psalm with which to compare this.

It stands really in a league of its own in terms of its wisdom and its force. It's to our great loss, perhaps, that we have relegated this psalm to the lowest tier.

In and of itself, it's a literary marvel. It's what's called an acrostic poem in that each line begins with a successive letter of the alphabet.

Rather, like we might say, Andrew was a poet, brilliant at his art. Clearly, he wrote verses delightful to the heart and so on.

[2 : 34] But it's not really its literary brilliance that sets it apart. This psalm is full of God. Now, we see at least two themes here.

The works of God and the worship of God. Perhaps by the end of our short study this morning, you too will have inscribed over your hearts the words, The works of the Lord are great, studied by all those who take delight in them.

First of all then, the works of God. The works of God. This psalm is dominated by the phrase, The works of God, in verse 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7.

They are vaguely described as the works of the Lord, full of splendor and majesty, wondrous works, powerful works, and the works of His hands.

And that's why in our Bibles, Psalm 111 is entitled, Great are the Lord's works. Here's a song devoted entirely to the praise of what God has done.

[3 : 52] The Anglo-Saxon saga Beowulf tells the story of a hero whose life work consists in slaying the evil monster Grendel.

But it's a saga. It's a tale. The works of our God are no myth. They can be seen and experienced.

They can be measured. They can be calculated. We read at least three in this psalm. Creation, providence, and redemption. First work, creation.

In verse 2, The works of the Lord are His creation of the universe. Now, we spent considerable time on this point when we studied Psalm 8 together.

But this is a significant feature of many of the Psalms. God's creative power. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

[4 : 49] He didn't just create those things we don't understand. He created everything. The seas and their mighty waves. The sheer volume of life forms which live under the water.

From the microscopic phytoplankton. To the mighty whales. From those fish who live near the surface. To organisms which live miles down in the seabed. God created the land with all its variety. Mountains and valleys. Deserts and mountains. Tundra. Savanna. He made all the plants and He made all the animals. The other week, I saw a red admiral. That's a very common butterfly. There are millions of them. Yet, no two red admirals boast exactly the same colors. And exactly the same patterns. How fragile and perfectly designed are their wings. It lives only for one or two weeks. [5 : 50] See how wonderful a creature the red admiral is. How much color it brings to our gardens. But then God created as the pinnacle of His creative achievement, the human race.

There are few more dramatic yet remarkable scenes than watching a ballet dancer at work. He or she is so graceful, yet precise. Every movement is carefully choreographed and set perfectly to the music. Sometimes the dancer seems like she's flying. Other times, he's folding himself into an impossible shape. How great their creator. How skillful His art in writing into our DNA the human imperative to itself create. God is the divine artist. God is the divine artist. And he makes us in his image as creative beings. The first professor of physics at the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge was the famous Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell.

[6 : 54] Now, Maxwell was himself a devoted Christian. And it was said of him that he had committed large portions of the Book of Psalms to memory. Little wonder then that over the laboratory of the Cavendish are inscribed these words, Great are the works of the Lord.

Because ultimately, the only true basis upon which the discipline of science can be performed is upon the world view Christianity provides. With God as the creator and author of the mathematics and physics of the universe.

But then we don't have to be physicists to appreciate Psalm 111. We just have to have ears and eyes to listen to music and watch a ballet dancer.

The creation is mind-stretching. Great are the works of the Lord. How much greater than the creator than his creation? The second of God's works.

Providence. Providence. Providence. How great are God! When it comes to great people of this world, we think that they have so many important things to do that they're not really interested in us.

[8 : 14] They're great. Why would they interest themselves in the ups and downs of normal people like us? We say of them, perhaps, well, they're too great to be bothered by my concerns. And sometimes we translate this to our relationship with God.

The greatest of the great. And we say of him, well, he's got a universe to manage. He's way too great to be bothered by my wee problems. And then we read Psalm 111 verse 5.

He provides food for those who fear him. He provides food for those who fear him. The reality is that our God is too great not to be concerned about each of us.

The details of our lives, even down to our daily needs. We've got a word for this. Providence. The clue is in the word itself. Providence.

Providence is the story of how God provides for all our needs. Jesus talks about it in the famous Sermon on the Mount. About God, our Heavenly Father, providing all we need to eat and what we need to wear.

[9 : 26] Jesus even teaches us to pray, saying, give us this day our daily bread. The works of the Lord are so great that they reach into our daily lives and provide for our daily needs.

He may have made the stars in the sky, but we see his commitment to us in the food we eat. Whatever it is you're going to be having for dinner today, your hands may have prepared it, but ultimately it came from God.

It's the gift of his grace to you to provide you with what you need for life and health. The great people of this world may be too great to be bothered by our concerns, but God is too great not to be bothered by our concerns.

He may rule the universe from his heavenly throne, but in providence he provides for us. Never mind over the doors of the Cavendish laboratory, over the doors of our kitchens, we should inscribe the words, great are the works of the Lord.

The third work of the Lord, redemption, redemption. The world God made was perfect. And he looked upon it and said, behold, it is very good.

[10:44] But the world as it is today is very far from perfect. Broken, flawed, ruined by the violence and greed of mankind. There is more than enough food for every human being, but it's mismanaged and greedily stockpiled for the consumption of the rich.

There's violence and death in the natural order, degradation and destruction of entire ecosystems. The beautiful butterfly, it lives but a week and then it's gone forever.

Humankind capable of the gracefulness of Bali is also capable of rape, war and murder. The same technology harnessed to cure the sick is harnessed to kill others.

The problem is, of course, humankind's sin and guilt. The inner brokenness of our hearts, our selfishness, our self-interest. Our world is broken because we are broken.

Every one of us is broken. But far from leaving us to ruin, in verse 9 we read these words, He sent redemption to His people.

[11:57] He sent redemption to His people. The word literally used is ransom. God has paid our ransom price for our freedom from our sin, guilt, brokenness, ruin and destruction.

And the ransom He sent isn't a price. It's a person. Here in this verse we have a direct reference to the coming and the dying of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In 1 Timothy 2 verse 6 we read, Christ Jesus gave Himself as a ransom. In Psalm 111 verse 9 we have a direct link to the cross on which our Lord gave Himself as a ransom for our sin.

The Creator dying for His creation. The Creator paying the price for its ruin. He sent redemption to His people. The Creator was destroyed for them.

He was ruined for them. He was crushed for them. He Himself said in Mark 10, 45, The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and give His life a ransom for many.

[13:13] God Himself paid the ransom price for our sin and guilt, our greed and violence, our pain and death. God Himself, He could not have paid a higher price the death of His own beloved Son.

He sent redemption to His people. The condition upon which that ransom has been paid is faith in Him.

That any man or woman, boy or girl, regardless of their ethnic background or moral status, should believe and trust in Him. That they should become His people for whom He paid such a high price. The Cavendish in Cambridge has inscribed over its doors, Great are the works of the Lord. Great they are indeed. But we see them in far more places than a physics lab.

Yes, of course, we see them there deep in an atomic structure, in the biochemistry of DNA. We see them in the food we eat. More than anyone else, we see these works inscribed over the cross on which Jesus died.

[14:24] Full of splendor and majesty is His work. Only God Himself could have paid the ransom price for the brokenness and ruin of our sinful world.

The day is coming when this world as we know it will be renewed into an even greater perfection in its first creation. When there shall be no more tears and no more pain and no more death, no more greed, no more sin, no more guilt.

An eternal time. Where the forever song of God's people will ring over the whole earth. Great are the works of the Lord. This is the vision and the praise of this psalm.

The works of God. Well, second and more briefly, the second theme of this psalm is the worship of God.

The worship of God. God's people respond to God's greatness and His grace by praising Him. The psalm begins with the words, praise the Lord, or as we might know it from the original Hebrew language, hallelujah.

[15:39] Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Praise the Lord. The first word out of the writer's mouth is praise.

Now, we don't know the circumstances from which he wrote this psalm. We don't even know who wrote it. But whether in good times or in bad times, he is determined that the first word out of his mouth shall be, praise the Lord.

Time is way too short for us to go through every line in this psalm expanding on how it teaches us to praise God. But let me suggest three very brief themes which shine out teaching us how as Christians we can offer God worship for His works.

The first is, no, no, no. K-N-O-W, no. The writer is not praising God from a place of ignorance, but from a place of knowledge.

He knows and has experienced for himself the goodness, the greatness, and the grace of God firsthand. And knowing what he knows, he wants to know more.

[16:49] And he wants to invite us to join him in this great journey of discovery. In the first instance, he wants us to know these great works of God.

In verse 2, we read, studied by all who delight in them. Studied by all who delight in them. Here we have the mandate for all the disciplines of human science.

The German astrologer, early 18th century Johannes Kepler, revolutionized our understanding of the universe. But when asked about his work, he said, I am simply thinking the thoughts of God after him.

I am simply thinking the thoughts of God after him. The study of God's creation in whatever discipline is merely that, thinking God's thoughts after him.

For the Christian, there is as much spirituality in her science as there is in the pursuit of God's works.

[17:54] Not just though what we understand by science. Earlier we talked of the arts, the use of form, color, sound, movement.

The arts are no less the expression of God's greatness than the sciences. Kirk, for example. For Kirk, to listen to a really good jazz performance is almost as spiritual an experience as listening to a sermon.

Is that not right? The study of, he better say yes. The study of culture, no less than the study of chemistry, is a discovery of the greatness of the works of God.

So, in the first instance, Psalm 111 is commanding us, know God's works. Open your eyes. To study these works is to worship him.

But then, in the second instance, and this is more foundational than the first, the writer wants us to know who God is. He wants us to know who God is. Scattered throughout the Psalms, this Psalm is reference to God's character.

[19:07] In verse 3, his righteousness endures forever. In verse 4, he is gracious and merciful. It's said of his works in verse 7, they are faithful and just. In verse 8, faithfulness and uprightness.

And then, by way of climax, in verse 9, holy and awesome is his name. It's often been said that systematic theology or the study of God is the queen of sciences.

And we say this because, in and of itself, science has no final purpose unless it is the glory of God. Unless it is, in Kepler's words, to think the thoughts of God after him.

We study the works of God so that we may engage in the worship of God. I'll say that again. We study the works of God.

This is especially important if you're a uni student or you're in school. We study the works of God so that we may engage in the worship of God. And the God we worship is all these things stated of him.

[20:11] Righteous, gracious, merciful, faithful, upright, holy and awesome. And we see him in the face of the risen and exalted Lord Jesus Christ. The Christ who, though he is the lamb who was slain, is also the lion of the tribe of Judah, the king who sits on the golden throne of heaven.

How gracious our Lord, how merciful and faithful. How righteous, how upright, how awesome our God. We may know more science than Stephen Hawking's.

But unless we know God himself, our science is for nothing. Do you know God, the real God, who is gracious, merciful and holy?

It was the Christian faith of the Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell that gave him the confidence to make strides in his scientific research. But Maxwell did not find God in his scientific instruments in the first place.

He came to know God through the Bible. The trustworthy precepts of God, verse 7. God's word, the Bible, is where you'll meet God in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

[21:24] It's in and through his word that you'll discover that God and his works are great, wondrous, and full of splendor and majesty. And discovering him, you'll put your faith in him.

Because to know him is to worship him. Second aspect of worship. Live. Live, in verse 10, in wisdom language.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. All those who practice it or live in it have a good understanding. It's one thing to know the truth. It's another thing to live it out. It's good to fear or worship the Lord.

That's the beginning of wisdom. It's even better to practice it or as the New King James Version puts it, A good understanding of all those who do his commandments.

It's one thing to know it's an even better thing to do. The writer's calling us to live in the knowledge of God and the greatness of his works. Now, we all know the dangers of driving without a seatbelt.

[22 : 25] More fool us if we don't put our seatbelts on when we drive. We all know the importance of a healthy diet. More fool us if we eat only Big Macs, crisps, and chocolate.

At the end of the day, the only way we can prove that we know the truth is if we live the truth. That is the only evidence of our consistency. So, if God is so great, we must live in humility and holiness.

If God is so gracious and merciful, we must be quick to confess our sin and receive his forgiveness.

If God is so faithful, we must depend upon his promise, strength, and comfort. Remembering that God is too great not to be concerned about those things which trouble us.

Our heavenly Father knows what we need. So, let's rest in his daily provision. Let's determine to live out the truth so much so that it may be written above our lives.

Great are the works of the Lord. And then, the third way to worship God in this psalm is to speak. To speak. To speak.

[23 : 31] To know. To live. To speak. For the writer of this psalm, his faith was no private matter. For him, God and his works were so very great that he cannot keep them to himself.

He says, I'll give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart in the company of the upright, in the congregation. Here's the picture of this writer. And he's lifting up his voice in songs about God.

He's in the temple courts in Jerusalem so that all the other worshippers can hear him and join with him in singing God's praises also. He sings. He must sing. He sings not only.

He speaks the praises of God. To those who listen to him, he is proclaiming the greatness of God in his works. He's not gone to the temple to talk about the weather.

He's gone to the temple to talk about his God. The apostle Paul said, I believe, therefore I spoke. Psalm 111 calls us to speak about the greatness of God and his works to each other.

[24 : 35] Do we do this? We won't do it unless we make it our intention to do it. To purposefully turn to someone near us and perhaps to talk to them about the sermon we just heard.

That's one reason we have tea and coffee after the service so that we can discuss these things with one another. Not the weather. But the great things of the Lord.

No, Psalm 111 doesn't get the press it deserves. It calls upon us to make great are the works of the Lord the inscription over our lives, just as it is over the cross, just as it is over our kitchens, and just as it is over the whole creation.

This Psalm calls us to worship the God of grace, mercy, holiness, righteousness, faithfulness, and uprightness. The whole of God's creation praises him, and yet our voices are so often strangely silent.

Today the God of our fathers is calling us to put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. To recognize the greatness of his works and to open our mouths in praise of him.

[25 : 56] The pursuit of science says, do it. The message of the cross says, do it.

And the course of our lives says, do it. What then is holding us back from hearing the invitation of this Psalm to experiencing for ourselves the goodness and the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ?

Amen. Amen.