

# Psalm – Bach Cantata 51

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, I want to express on your behalf our thanks to Charlene Pauls and to the orchestra for helping lead us through Cantata 51. This cantata was written in 1730 at the end of Bach's most prolific and fruitful period of composition.

And almost all the cantatas from 1728 to 1730 were solo cantatas, no choir, just a soloist. And some commentators do not take kindly to this. They suggest darkly that the church choir had fallen on hard times. And no one I read made the obvious suggestion that actually there may have been an outstanding soprano in the choir.

That's my idea. But whatever your thought about that, Albert Schweitzer says that all sopranos interested in Bach are recommended to practice this cantata daily.

Daily. What is so surprising about this cantata is that every note and every bar and every word is positive praise to God.

[ 1 : 19 ] If you've heard some of Bach's other cantatas, you will know that while they begin and end with praise, they will often go into the depths of suffering and they will explain our disobedience and our need of a Saviour Jesus Christ, the reality of judgment and the joy of life with him.

But this cantata that was written for the 15th Sunday after Trinity has nothing to do with the Bible readings that were set for that day. Instead, it's an explosion of extravagant praise that's written around Psalm 148.

That's why I had the psalm printed for you in your bulletin. And if you want to have a look at it, we're going to work through it together in English so that you might understand it better.

The basic point of the psalm is this.

The job of our lives, the main point of our lives, is to learn how to join with all creation in praising God. The music of this world and the music of heaven and the music of eternity is the praise of God who is our Creator and our Redeemer and our Lord.

[ 2 : 43 ] And you can hardly miss it as it was read for us. Thirteen times we are commanded, praise the Lord. And I am aware that this is a stumbling block to many.

Some people think that God must be very insecure and vain to need our constant praise. You know we pity those people who need constant assurances of how wonderfully good they are.

And this troubled a very prominent Christian writer by the name of C.S. Lewis. He struggled with the question, why on earth would God want to be told by us how good and great He is?

I mean the Bible teaches from beginning to end that God is not like a vain artist in constant need of our affection. And again and again we are told He needs nothing from us.

And in one of the psalms, as the people of Israel think that they are doing God a favour by offering Him worship and sacrifices of bulls and goats, God says, if I was hungry, I would go to a hill and I would take one of the cows there and eat it because all the cows on all the hills in all the world are mine.

[ 3 : 58 ] But Lewis says this, he says, The world rings with praise. Lovers praising their mistresses. Readers their favourite poet. Walkers praising the countryside.

Players praising their favourite game. The humblest and at the same time most balanced and capacious minds praised most. While the cranks, the misfits and malcontents praised least.

I think he's right. And there's nothing abstract or theoretical about this. Because part of the essence of praise is that we want other people to join with us in praising whatever it is that is the object of our affection.

Let me give you an illustration. The Rugby World Cup is on. Yesterday I watched Australia play another small country and they won by 142 to 0.

It was their B team.

[ 5 : 09 ] Australia's B team that they were fielding. However, the fact that that's the highest score ever achieved in a Rugby World Cup and the fact that Australia did it with such consummate ease was entirely lost on my wife.

She was resistant to my many urgings for her to come and praise the Australian team. And the reason I tell you, I think what happens is that our desire for others to join us in praise finds expression even if we do it badly.

On Thursday night I picked up two of the members from our household from a concert by a group with the unsavoury name of Red Hot Chili Peppers. And I stood on the corner of Hastings and Renfrew with a number of other distraught parents as wave after wave of teenagers came out of the concert hall, the Pacific Coliseum and the traffic snarled.

And from time to time groups of teenagers walking on the sidewalk would stop, put their heads back and scream. Just a long scream.

And from time to time this would be answered responsibly from a number of very full cars as teenagers in those cars answered back with their own long inarticulate scream.

[ 6 : 32 ] And I took it as a form of praise actually. I think what they were saying was that was a good concert. And we are well satisfied with the \$62 that we...

You get my point. You know at the other end of the spectrum one of the German authors I read this week about Bach and they're all very... They're all...

They want us to praise Bach. This is how one of the German authors said it. Quote, The architectonic and contrapuntal perfection of his works gives such deep and pure satisfaction to the mind.

Do you feel like praising after that? Well, When it comes to praising others and God, Lewis says, We delight to praise what we enjoy because praise not merely expresses our delight, it completes the enjoyment.

It's a very important point. You see, it's not out of compliments that the lover keeps telling the other lover how beautiful they are. The delight is incomplete until it is expressed.

[ 7 : 49 ] So it is, the worthier the object, the more intense our delight in it. And if it was possible for the most fully created human being to love and delight in, the most worthy of object of all, and simultaneously at every moment to give perfect expression to their delight, that person would be in supreme beatitude.

That's why heaven is not like being in church forever and ever and ever. I don't know if you've ever been troubled by that. Heaven is like this.

Try to imagine yourself being in perfect love with God, drunk with and drowned with and dissolved in delight. And instead of being pent up and not able to communicate that, it flows out in effortless and perfect expression with those around you, so that your inner joy and your outer expression perfectly mirror one another for all eternity.

The ancient Christians used to say that the chief goal of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. And those two things are the same.

And what this psalm does for us is it prepares us for heaven by opening the door of heaven so that we're able to listen and understand that the purest form of joy for any being created is joy in God.

[ 9 : 18 ] But it's very difficult for us to hear that because our careful and practiced sophistication and cynicism shrivels our spirits and deadens our hearts.

And it's very difficult to imagine having something so good in your lives and so remarkable and life-giving that will make you want to praise and call others to praise. But when we come to this psalm, we learn that true praise opens us up and makes us join with all the creatures that have ever been created and makes us not a little ashamed of our self-absorption.

And the psalm itself is an illustration of the most perfect artistry. It is written in two beautifully balanced halves. In verses 1 to 6, it begins in the heavens and calls on the heavenly creatures to praise as it comes down to earth.

And then in the verses 5 and 6, it gives us the reason for it. And then in verse 7, we begin in the deepest parts of the earth and it rises up to God's children and then we're given the reasons for praise.

It is full of delight, full of exuberance. Let's look at those two halves. The first half I've called praise from the heavens. Verses 1 and 2.

[10:39] Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord from the heavens. Praise Him in the heights. Praise Him, all His angels and all His hosts. Here is the drumbeat of heaven.

Praise for God's goodness, for His power, for His wisdom. And the psalm, this is very different from the kinds of amens that you usually hear in church, even when they're a little bit excited.

This is not dutiful church going. This is full of the kind of delight that makes you want to get up and actually do something because it brings us into contact with reality.

That's why the psalm begins in heavens. Because those angels who exist around God can see God and so that their mouths and their hearts and their minds are totally full of the praise of God.

And the psalm says, don't keep your praise to yourself. Lead us. Draw us into the song. Perhaps we will learn the tune. If you read through the Bible, whenever the veil is pulled aside and a human being is allowed to look into heaven, what they see is music.

[11:52] And the content of the music is this. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory. Verse 3. Praise Him, sun and moon, shining stars, highest heavens, water above heavens.

The physical universe is an orchestra and the real music is in praise to God. The sun sings the praise of God until evening.

The moon and the stars carry the harmony and if you listen to them, their song goes like this, verse 5. He commanded and we were created. He established us forever and ever.

He fixed our bounds that cannot be passed. That's why horoscopes and astrology are so wrong-headed. The heavens don't declare the destiny of humans, but the glory of God.

The basis of their praise is simply this. They didn't make themselves. He commanded. He established. He fixed. And for that alone, God is worthy.

[12:58] And what it means is that the world in which you and I live is not just mute material, but it pulsates with intention and its intention is to praise God.

Listen to another psalm. The heavens are telling the glory of God. The firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech. Night to night declares knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words. Their voice is not heard. Yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the ends of the world. This is praise from heaven.

And the second half, verses 7 to 14, is praise from the earth, perfectly mirrored. Praise the Lord from the earth.

And we begin deep in the sea, verse 7. You see monsters in all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command. Whales and sea lions and sharks, belugas.

[14:00] All these creatures that seem to have not a lot of regard for us as human beings, but they heartily confess their praise of God. Hail and fire and snow and frost do not work by chance.

They're not controlled by laws of nature, but they obey God's command. The stormy wind, which is completely beyond our control, is a great wind instrument sounding the praise of God.

And the mountains, the Alps and the Rockies, the local mountains, raise their heads in joyful praise to God. And it's not until we come to verse 11 that we meet human beings.

And we begin in verse 11 with kings and rulers because they are the ones who attempted to think that the world was made for them. And we're told, no, no, no, not entitlement, but gratitude is the appropriate response.

You see, the Bible's view is that we, as human beings, are created for worship. We are created to praise and enjoy God.

[15:10] There is a true story that I've told before here of a group of American tourists who visited the Houses of Parliament in London, England. And as they're walking down one of the corridors, the Chancellor of the Exchequer came out of a room and started walking towards them, dressed in his full regalia.

Behind the group of American tourists, another friend of the Chancellor's came towards him, whose name was Neil. And so the Chancellor called past these group of American tourists, Neil.

And they did. And someone asked me to put Australians in that story, but I can promise you they would not have knelt, although they worship other things.

The point I'm making is that we are a worshipping people and the issue is if we do not worship God, we don't stop worshipping. We merely replace God with something else.

It's just so easy in Vancouver. There are so many distracting and different idols in this desperate attempt to manufacture happiness. And the more we replace God, the more desperate the attempt

becomes until we find that we have nothing to sing about.

[16:40] And I know some of us know that experience. Listen to how the New Testament puts it. Ever since the creation of the world, God's invisible character, his eternal power and deity, have been clearly shown in the things that have been made.

So we are without excuse. For although we knew God, we did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but we became futile in our thinking and our senseless minds were darkened. The reason we stop worshipping and praising God is not because we're grumpy and having a bad day. It is because we want to replace God with something else or someone else, often ourselves. That's the heart of idolatry. Idolatry is taking the praise that belongs to God alone and attaching it to something else. And if the sun and the moon and the heavens have good reason to praise God, we have more.

For while we see the power of God in creation, we see the perfection of God in his salvation. And I want to look just at the last two verses as we finish.

[17:51] Let them praise the name of the Lord. This is to us. For his name alone is exalted. His glory is above earth and heaven.

He has raised up a horn for his people. Praise for all his saints. For the people of Israel who are near to him. Praise the Lord.

And when we come to the beginning of the New Testament, we discover that the horn of salvation is the person of Jesus Christ.

And at the heart of salvation, the thing that has gripped the psalmist is that in salvation, God brings us to be near to him. The God whose glory is above the heavens and below the earth sends to us a deliverer, the person of Jesus Christ.

And he comes from God, bringing the love of God and the salvation of God. And if you take one of the Gospels and read it, you will see Jesus Christ as he heals the sick, as he embraces the outcast, as he walks on water and speaks of heaven and raises people from the dead.

[19:04] And you will hear him say that I will be taken to Jerusalem and I'll be crucified. And three days later, I will rise again. And you can see that he does it. And the whole reason that he travelled from heaven to earth was to draw us back into friendship with him, to reverse our idolatry so that we might be near to him.

While we were far off, giving ourselves to various idols, he reveals himself and draws us back into his embrace. And those who become like little children and have the humility to entrust themselves to him, it is they who share the kingdom of heaven.

You see, we do not praise God because it's good for us to do it, because we need it. We don't praise because there's anything particularly wonderful in the activity of praising.

Nor do we praise God because God needs it. We're doing it because when we do, we face reality. And when we face reality, our only option is to praise God.

And it's very striking to me that this cantata was written closer to the end of Bach's life. Most of us begin our lives with wonder and astonishment as children.

[20:28] And as we fill our lives with distraction and idols, we become very serious and grave and hidden from one another. It is Bach's earlier cantatas that are solemn and severe.

But here, late in his life, we find the reverse. A childlike delight and joy in God. And so for us, this morning, who live here in Vancouver, we have so little excuse not to be grateful.

The mountains that you go out of church and look at, they raise their hands in praise of God. The sea roars back its thanks to him and the forests wave their adoration.

But more than that, we know what it cost him to draw us near to himself. How he became one of us. How he died in our place and rose to free us from death and he will take us to be with him in glory where our hearts will be filled with the living water of praise forever and ever.

and I think that's why in this aria, the next aria in this cantata, Bach refers to us as the children of God.

[21:42] And as Charlene comes and sings for us, let us pray that God might open our eyes to the wonders of his love, that we might turn to him and become like little children.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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