

Fear Of The Lord Leads To Understanding

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[0 : 0 0] God and Father, as we turn to your word, we ask that your presence may be with us, that your Holy Spirit may guide and direct us, and that the end result of our bowing our heads over your word may be that we lift our heads to praise you.

Amen. I don't know what you feel like getting up on the morning after Christmas Day, but I want to assure you that it's not nearly as bad as having to preach the sermon after Christmas, when everything has been said and everything has been done and everybody has been here and we start again.

And so for my inspiration, I go to the Psalms, which I find helpful, and to direct me in them, I turn to commentaries by Derek Kidner, mostly, who was a professor of mine once upon a time, and who, if you take him to guide you through the Psalms, you can find it an enormously enriching experience.

And so I want you all to be enormously enriched this morning as you turn to Psalm 111, and that you will find this a great help to set you on your way, looking back to the year that's been and ahead to the year that will be.

Psalm 111, which is on page 539 in your Blue Pew Bible. Don't look it up in the prayer book because the prayer book leaves the first line out, and the first line is very important.

[1 : 5 0] The first line is, Hallelujah, praise the Lord. And that's a great way to start. When I talk to people about sermons I preach, they wonder why I complain so much, and I find very often bitterness creeps in, and cynicism creeps in, and sarcasm creeps in, and I'm complaining about this situation and that situation.

I'm not sure why, but it seems to be my nature, and I have to deal with it. So I find it a great help for me in speaking, and I hope for you in hearing, to remind you that it is our first business, constant business.

It is the occupation of our lifetime that we should give praise to the Lord above all else that we do. That's the reason for which we exist, and that's where Psalm 111 begins.

And then it goes on to say, I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, and in the congregation.

And so that praising of God is followed immediately by giving thanks to God. But there's an important clue here, which I want to commend to your careful attention.

[3 : 0 7] It talks about the company of the upright. That company of the upright, you may not know, is your weeknight home Bible study group, among which you are to share your praise for the Lord, and to give thanks to the Lord within that group.

And Derek Kidner points out that it's a very special word, that word company, because he says it means both counsel, spelled C-O-U-N-C-I-L, and counsel, C-O-U-N-C-I-L.

He says both those words come together in this word company. It's the company of trusted friends, among whom you pray, within whom you share your life, and with whom you study.

And he points out in a wonderful way that I found very encouraging for our whole study group program, that this is the way God speaks to his people.

He doesn't give us some sacred shrine at the top of some far-off mountain, but he gives you the company of your friends, among whom, in sharing your faith with them, in praying with them, in talking with them, in taking counsel from them, in giving counsel to them, you work out what is the will of God.

[4 : 32] You work out his will in your life. If your life lacks such a company, then your life is notably impoverished by that.

And we all need that kind of company of friends, among whom we can share our thanksgiving, and our trust, and the witness we can make to God's goodness to us.

So the two places where we are to give thanks to the Lord is in that company of friends and in the congregation, as we assemble week by week in the great congregation, to give thanks to God.

Then if you look at the psalm carefully, you'll see that there are five occasions in which the word works appears. This psalm, just for your interest, in way of some background, is an acrostic.

It's a kind of A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and you begin one verse with each of the letters of the alphabet. Only this was done in Hebrew, so there are 22 Hebrew verses, beginning with 22 Hebrew letters, each of them extolling who God is and giving thanks and praise to him for it.

[5 : 57] So it's that kind of thing. It's also totally about God. That's all it talks about, is about God and his works and who he is.

And so it's a unique psalm in that way. There is a matching psalm, which is 112, which begins, as you will see, the same way, praise the Lord, and goes on to talk about the man of God.

But this morning, we're dealing only with part of Psalm 111, which is concerned with God himself. And you will see that his name is the Lord.

Capital L, capital O, capital R, capital D. And you will see that I was reminded by reading Archbishop William Temple this past week of why we believe in God.

And we don't owe our faith in Christ to our belief in God. He says we owe it to the Greek philosophers at least up to a point. Yesterday, we were doing some hard rock mining over on Main Island.

[7 : 07] That is, we were digging big rocks out of the hillside. And the rock was very hard and very heavy. And in one instance, it was surrounded by the root of a tree, which wouldn't let it move.

And yet, we went at it with the tools that we had, crowbars and pickaxes and things. We began to work on it so that even a child of eight or nine was able to move the rock.

And then we moved the rock out and we began to try and hit it with a hammer to give some shape to it by knocking off parts of it. Well, the reason I give you that very homely illustration is that you start with rock and then soil and then trees and then tools and then people and then wise people and artistic people and scientific people.

And on all the way up you go until, this is what William Temple says, until you get to the point where you recognize that probably the highest thing in the whole of creation is personality.

And therefore, the one who is the creator, the one who is at the source of all this, must in some way be personality. There must be a theos, a god who is there.

[8 : 36] But then human wisdom starts because, stops because we don't know his name. We don't know who he is. We can reasonably believe that he's there, but we don't know his name.

What William Temple tells us is, we owe it to the scriptures to tell us what the name of God is. Who it is to whom we give thanks.

We don't give thanks to a kind of an impersonal reality that is out there, but to a personal God who has made himself known in history. Well, that's why we give thanks to God.

Thanks to the Lord with our whole hearts in the company of the upright and in the congregation because this great God is a God who does works.

And works appears five times, as I say, in this 111 psalm. It tells about his works.

[9 : 40] That is, in the first instance, the things he has made. And an interesting thing, we're told about this second verse. Read it with me, will you, just so you get the taste of it.

Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who have pleasure in them. And Derek Kidner says that that is the inscription over the door of the Cavendish Laboratories in Cambridge University.

Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who have pleasure in them. And so you see the enormity of, the enormous reality of the things that God has done.

And I thought of, out of this comes, out of this verse comes the study of zoology, anthropology, chemistry, physics, sociology, biology, botany, geology, archaeology.

And then I thought I would leave you for a post-Christmas game to sit down and see how many words that you can find and with ology. And all of them come within the scope of Psalm 111, verse 2.

[10 : 53] That is the source and inspiration for the work of scientists. That's the source and inspiration of the work of artists and musicians and all sorts of people working on verse 2.

The works of the Lord studied by all who take pleasure in them. And then it goes on to talk about, in verse 3, full of honor and majesty is his work.

And this, in verse 3, it's suggested that that refers to the providential acts of God in which we are aware of God caring for us and providing for us.

Another thing that Archbishop William Temple points out, which again I find helpful, is that religious experience is pretty well universal. Most people find the birth of a child a religious experience.

Most people find a serious illness a religious experience. Most people find in any crisis situation something of a religious experience. A beautiful day, a beautiful sunset, a beautiful friendship, all sorts of wonderful things which are God's providential care of us.

[12 : 12] Give us a sense that God is and that we are up against that reality. And when we pray the Lord's Prayer and say, lead us not into temptation, it's in a sense of prayer, lead us not into the place where we don't experience the reality at least of your providential care.

Don't leave us. So, most of us have a theoretical knowledge of who God is and an awareness, as verse 3 says, that he is full of honor and majesty as his work and his righteousness endures forever, that there is a constant reality to God's providential care of us.

One that we need to get hold of. The fears and the anxieties crowd in upon us, but the providential, the reality of the providential care of God is the thing that grips us and holds onto us.

In verse 4, it holds on, let me go back to verse 3 a minute. In verse, it not only tells us what God has done, but it reminds us powerfully of what God is doing.

And we need to be very much aware of that in our lives because we teach children about what God has done and we thank God for what he has done and we go on like this and all of us are very often hiding the simple reality in our own hearts of a hard agnostic unbelief saying, if he's done all that, why isn't he doing something right now?

[13 : 49] And this is why we need to be very much aware of what he is doing now in terms of verse 3. Full of honor and majesty is his work and his righteousness endures and endures and endures and goes on working itself out in all the circumstances of our life and of our history.

In verse 4, he has caused his wonderful works to be remembered. That's, God has set up certain memorials which we are to be very much aware of.

That is, he doesn't let us forget what he has done. When, when we were in Jerusalem and went to that, that terrible place that records in minute detail the reality of the Holocaust and where there is a room as big as this room here and all the way up and down it are the names and biographical notes and photographs of everybody they can find who was killed in the Holocaust.

And that nation is concerned to remember, to remember the terrible thing that happened to them as a nation. So God wants us to remember the great and good things that he has done.

And so at the center of our life and worship together is the service of remembrance. When we take bread and break it and pour out wine and share it.

[15 : 30] And this we do in remembrance of him because of verse 4. He's caused his wonderful works to be remembered that we don't forget who he is and what he's done.

We wake up most mornings thinking, well, there's just me and then there's the world. And we need to be reminded and at that point there is God and then there is me and then there is the world.

But most of us we become so self-centered all the time and we are so forgetful of who God is. And so he has in verse 4 caused his wonderful works to be remembered.

His grace and his mercy towards us. He provides food, verse 5, for those who fear him. He is ever mindful of his covenant.

Just then as in verse 4 it says, don't you forget me. In verse 5 it says, and I won't forget you. Bread and God's grace and mercy on which we are dependent from day to day.

[16 : 45] He will not forget. He provides for those who fear him. He is ever mindful of his commitment to us. We're not ever mindful of our commitment to him.

We need constantly to be reminded of it. But God is ever mindful of his commitment to us. Well, in verse 6 it goes on to say, he has shown his people the power of his works in giving them the heritage of the nations.

The deeds he has done. And his heritage belongs to all the nations. Reading about, there's a kind of description of the place of the Psalms in the new book of alternative services which is in the pews.

and it reminds us that the Psalms are not Christian. That they belong to the old covenant. They are pre-Christian. But much of our spiritual heritage is found in them.

So that the heritage is not just to us, but it's to the whole world. And that heritage comes to fulfillment in Christ, but it's a heritage that belongs to the whole world.

[18 : 08] And that every nation comes under his judgment. In verse 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11, it says these things.

Verse 7, the works of his hand are faithful and just. All his precepts are trustworthy. I think there's room for a book to be written on that verse because what it does, it puts the works of God and the precepts of God together.

And you know that in our lives that doesn't happen. What we teach and what we do are two quite different things. And that's where we get into all our trouble. What we think and how we behave are two quite different things.

That's the nature of sin. What we aspire to and what we achieve are two quite different things. They're just hopelessly removed from one another. We may in our imagination think that we are what we think but we are also what we do.

And the contradiction between them is apparent to all our friends, especially the ones who are closest to us. But with God, you see what it says? The works of his hands are faithful and just and his precepts are trustworthy.

[19 : 28] What he teaches and what he does are exactly the same thing. That's why we can have confidence in his word. That's why his promises are sure and we can depend utterly upon them because they are the same thing, his precepts and his words.

They are, verse 8, established forever and ever to be performed with faithfulness. That is, he goes on, he is consistent. We don't have our day and our moment.

ah, we, that's what we have. But God is characterized by being the same and enduring faithfulness is the characteristic of who he is.

His, his works and precepts are established forever and ever to be performed with faithfulness and righteousness.

In verse 10, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. But you've all heard that before. But it's so, it's so much the reality of our world.

[20 : 42] You go back to verse, to verse 2 again. Great are the works of the Lord studied by all those who have pleasure in them. Well, we become so absorbed by the study of them that we lose the sense that they are the works of the Lord.

And as a couple in this congregation, wonderfully reminded me in a picture which I will never forget, at the heart of Cambridge University is King's College Chapel, towering above everything else.

So that the heart of the studying community is the worshiping community. If there is to be study, and if there is to be industry, and if there is to be scientific research, and all of those things, they gather around as communities that are spawned by the worshiping community.

But at the center is the worshiping community. And that's what that means when it says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Back to verse 2.

Great are the works of the Lord studied by all who have pleasure in them. Those two things must be kept in balance, one with another. And the reason they must be kept in balance is in verse 9.

[21 : 54] He sent redemption to His people. He has commanded His covenant forever. Holy and terrible is His name. He is a holy and a terrible God.

And we need to be living in constant fear and dread of His holy name. I know how people don't like that.

and I hear it quite a lot. But I think it's desperately important that verse 9 comes before verse 10. Holy and terrible is His name.

Because we don't see, if you don't understand that, you don't understand why that holy fear is the beginning of wisdom.

and without that holy fear, men should not be trusted with wisdom. Men can't handle knowledge if they don't have the fear of a holy and terrible God who will hold them to account.

[23 : 07] They can't be trusted. They can't be trusted with money, with power, with knowledge, with any of those things, unless at the heart of their lives is the fear of God, the fear of the Lord.

That is essential to all of us. And our life is just such a puny, dry, sawdusty kind of a thing unless it's held together by that wonderful reality which commands us to worship, to worship God.

If we don't have that, then everything else turns to ashes in our mouths. it's terrible. But with that holy and terrible fear of him is the beginning of wisdom.

And a good understanding comes from that of all those who practice it. Let me tell you then, you see, what it is in effect this.

If there isn't that holy and terrible fear of the Lord, or that fear of the Lord who is, who is holy and terrible, then we don't understand the gospel.

[24 : 27] We don't understand his love and his mercy and his grace and his forgiveness. We don't understand what that means.

And we, in a sense, take it for granted, well, you know, it's there. But then, if we have a sense of this God who is holy and just and righteous and terrible and whose name is to be fear, then, when we read that this God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, then things come into respect.

We see what it means that such a God did such a thing as to give us his son who died on the cross for our sins.

That's why it's necessary. And if there isn't deeply imbued in you a sense of the holy fear of God, then the wonder of his gospel has probably not broken through you either.

You don't understand. We don't understand that apart from this holy fear of God. And so, that's how the psalm ends.

[25 : 50] His praises endure forever. This God, we know through the psalms, this God, this holy and terrible God, said, in a sense, as he took all the things that we fear and all the things that we are afraid of and all the darkness that surrounds the awesome fear we have of him, and he strips himself naked, as it were, and is revealed to us, hung on a cross.

There you have it. God's that's why over and above every circumstance of our life, over and above every occasion that we come to in our lives, over and above every dreadful crisis or experience we endure, over and above all that, there is reason, undeniable reason, for us to praise the Lord for his faithfulness, his goodness to him.

Amen.