

St Andrew Bebington
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Revelation chapter 15

The Song of the Lamb

I discovered recently that David Hawkins, now Bishop of Barking, was a curate here at St Andrew's in the 1970s. I knew him slightly when he was on the staff of St Aldate's Church in Oxford in the 80s and in particular I well remember a brilliant sermon he preached on marriage. At one point he asked us, "Which of you married people here have said 'I love you' to your husband or wife today? When did you last tell her that you love her?"

Hang on! I've been married for almost 27 years. My wife knows I love her. Do I really need to tell her? Every day?

Yes; I do. Not in order to win her. Not in order to save a creaking relationship. Rather, to delight in and build a relationship which already exists. I need to say to my wife – and you need to say to yours, daily – I love you; thank you for that delicious meal; you look lovely today; well done not murdering my children; and so on. We praise our wives – and wives praise their husbands – to delight in and to build a secure relationship.

For the same reason God's people praise God. Praising God for his person and his character and his deeds should be a daily part of discipleship, a daily aspect of what it means to be a Christian. Saved people praise God: it's as simple as that.

But it wouldn't do to make my sermon as simple as that, so let's dig into this song of praise – The Song of the Lamb – and see how it models for us this simple but profoundly important truth: God's people praise him. The people of God are a people of praise.

God's people praise him

The book of Revelation is full of praise. Depending on how you count them, there are at least a dozen songs of praise, outbursts of giving glory and thanks to God. One of them is here in chapter 15 and we have already recited it together this morning. 'Who will not fear you, O Lord?' 'All nations will come and worship before you.' Here is the language of praise.

But it's not just in this book. The whole Bible is full of praise. From Genesis to Revelation, again and again, God's people praise him for who he is and for what he has done. It should be a normal part of a godly life. When Jesus healed ten lepers and only one came back to say 'thank you' – and he a foreigner – we all feel the scandal of it. Interestingly, in that story the one who gave thanks was the only one whom Jesus described as being saved: it rubs in the point that saved people praise God.

This verbalising of our faith is so important.

Think of these words, which many of you will know, from Romans: 'If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.' Genuine saving faith is demonstrated not simply by what we believe in our hearts, but also by what we say with our mouths. If we don't say it, do we believe it? If we never praise God, are we genuine believers?

One of my favourite Bible teachers, a man called Peter Adam, once said this: If you want your people to be orthodox – that is, to believe the truth about God – don't just teach them to believe the right things: teach them to thank God for the right things. Praising God will keep us believing in God.

OK then: we should praise God. What for? What should God's people praise him for?

The answer to that could be anything and everything, but let's look at the priorities we find here in Revelation: priorities which, I suggest, are reflected throughout the Scriptures.

God's people praise him for their deliverance

Have a look at verse 3, from which the title for today's talk comes:

They sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb.

By this John doesn't mean that they sang two songs; rather, he means 'they sang the song of Moses, that is to say, the song of the Lamb'. It's one song.

Now the background to that is Exodus chapter 15 and it would be really helpful to turn to it for a moment. Page And we'll pick up from the end of chapter 14, verse 30. The Israelites have just passed safely through the Red Sea, and the Egyptian army has been drowned, and . . .

That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. And when the Israelites saw the great power the

LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant. Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD [here's the Song of Moses]: "I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea. The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him. The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name." [etc.]

Now look at the sequence here: The Lord saved Israel; they saw how he had delivered them; then they put their trust in him; and then they praised him. They were saved; they believed; they praised. In other words, God's rescued people don't just believe and trust in him; they praise him for their rescue too. God's people praise him for their deliverance.

Now that whole Exodus context is echoed on the page in front of us. There is the reference to the sea of glass, reminding us of the Red Sea. There is a reference to the tabernacle being opened. Above all, the context is that of the seven angels pouring out the seven plagues, reminding us of the ten plagues that hit Egypt and from which the Israelites were delivered.

So, picking up from verse 2:

And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb . . .

We met this crowd last week, and before that back in chapter 7. They are God's rescued people who have come out of all the tribulations of this age and the judgment of God and are now standing victorious – victorious because of the blood of the Lamb. Like the Israelites of old, they have been delivered out of judgment . . . and so they praise God.

Saved people praise God for their deliverance.

So an immediate and crucial lesson for Christians is that our worship as a congregation and our daily lives as individuals should be full of praise to God for the cross of Jesus and our deliverance from the coming judgment. That is not the only thing for which we praise God, but it should be the central focus, just as it is in heaven: 'You are worthy, O Lamb, because you were slain and by your blood you purchased us for God.' That's from chapter 5.

So, perhaps we could ask one another, 'Have you praised God for the cross of Jesus today?' I'm not sure that praising God for the cross of Jesus is deeply embedded in my daily prayer routine; but it should be. I suspect that if we made a point of thanking God for the cross of Jesus every day, it would do our faith no end of good.

And that is true for our congregational praise also: in the words we speak together and the songs we sing together, praise for our deliverance, thanks for the cross of Jesus, should be central. It should not be the only aspect of our praise, but it should be central.

Most of the great hymns of past centuries have done just this. Whereas until recent years there were embarrassingly few modern songs which even made mention of Jesus' death. That has improved vastly, thank God, so let's make the most of the best.

God's people praise him for his justice

I imagine that most of us would agree, at least in principle, with what I've just explained: that we praise God for the cross of Jesus. We may find this more difficult: praising God for his justice.

Let's remind ourselves of the words of this short song of the Lamb, from verse 3:

"Great and marvellous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty.
Just and true are your ways, King of the ages.
Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come and worship before you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed."

God's people praise him here for his great deeds and his righteous acts. What are these deeds? What, exactly, has God done?

Well, if you read chapter 14 which comes before this song and chapter 16 which follows it you will see that God's acts are acts of judgment and the everlasting destruction of his enemies. Just look at chapter 15 verse 1:

I saw in heaven another great and marvellous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues – last, because with them God's wrath is completed.

and chapter 16 verse 1:

Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, "Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth."

It is exactly the same as the original song of Moses back in Exodus. "The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea . . . the LORD is a man of war; the LORD is his name."

God's people praise him for his justice, which means praising him for his destruction of evil.

How do we feel about that? I imagine that it doesn't sit that comfortably with us.

We need to step back a moment and understand how essential is the removal of evil from God's universe. If evil is not destroyed and removed, then in the end there can be no justice, no peace, no heaven, no eternal joy.

Now the wonder of the cross is that God himself, in the person of his Son, has taken on himself the full outpouring of his own wrath against evil, his settled anger against sin. This is what makes the cross essential in God's purposes. The reason we rejoice in the cross of Jesus is because that wrath against evil fell on and was borne by him – and therefore will not fall on us who trust in him. That was the message we saw back in chapter 7.

But you read on here into chapter 16 and what do you discover? They refused to repent . . . they cursed the God of heaven, but they refused to repent. And so those who are opposed to God must bear his wrath for themselves. That is their choice.

It was the same in Egypt. The Israelites were saved because they put the blood of the Lamb on their door frames. The Egyptians refused to do so and so the last terrible plague fell on them.

So when we pray, 'Your kingdom come', this judgment and removal of evil is included in our prayer.

It is dreadful – and this context helps us to see that praise is more than happy feelings – but it is ultimately very good news because it means that heaven is coming. And as I've said before, if we knew what persecution was like – if we had seen our pastors disappear and our wives raped and our children beheaded – then we would praise God that a day of justice was coming.

This is not about personal vengeance. We are still called to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Like God himself, we should take no personal delight in the death of the wicked. Rather, we long for the day when all the unrepentant ungodly will be judged and God's honour will be fully and publicly vindicated; when we can say, 'Your kingdom has come'.

God's people praise him for his character

Someone once asked a group of vicars: Do we seek God merely for his hand, or do we also seek his face? In other words, do we just want what God will do, or do we want God for himself? It was a good question to ask of busy pastors.

If we were to adapt the question for the subject of praise – do we praise God for what he has done or for who he is? – I would want to argue very strongly for both. In fact, I would go further and say that it is actually a false distinction: you cannot praise God for who he is without praising him for what he has done because one reveals the other: we know who God is by the things he has done. Above all, we know that God is love – how? – because he sent his only Son.

And here in the Song of the Lamb we see that God's people praise him for his character as that character is revealed in what he has done.

So, verse 3: Great and marvellous are your deeds. Those deeds, we said, are deeds of universal judgment, terrible judgment. How do we know that these deeds are not just raw power? Well, because – read on – those deeds are in keeping with ways, a character, which are just and true. And that character is just and true – and would you want anything more in a person that complete justice and complete truth? – because it is the expression of a being who, alone in all the universe, is holy. 'Holy' was our Big Bible Word last week and we heard how it is an attempt to explain the utter uniqueness and 'godness' of God.

God's character is perfect, holy, unique: and we know that – and therefore know him – through the things he has done.

In the Christianity Explored talks, Rico Tice refers to a characteristic quip from Noel Coward. He was once asked what he thought about God, and he replied, "I don't know. We've never been properly introduced."

It was a quick-witted reply, but there is a serious point there. We can't praise God if we don't know him; and we can't know him if we are not introduced to him; and they way to be introduced to him is to see what he has done, above all what he has done through Jesus.

This is how Bible worship works. We praise God for who he is, and we know who he is by what he has done.

So, think of the Psalms. They are full of phrases like 'Sing a new song' or 'Praise the Lord' or 'I love you, O Lord' or 'Worship the Lord' . . . and so on. But always there is a 'because'. I love the Lord because he heard my cry. Come let us worship and bow down . . . for he is our maker. I will sing of

your love because you are my fortress. You rescued me from violent men, therefore I will praise you, O Lord. God is praised for his character which is revealed by his deeds.

This is why it is so important that our hymns and songs have content: that they tell us about the character of God and the deeds of God. And especially that they celebrate the deliverance of God and the justice of God and the grace and the mercy of God, as they are revealed in the cross of Jesus.

God's people should be a people of praise. God's people should delight to praise him for their deliverance, for his justice, and for that wonderful character that those deeds display.

It is often noted that old people, sometimes people whose minds have slipped quite a long way and who have lost most of their memories, still remember the things that they used to sing. What we sing sticks, and it is a critical factor in framing what we believe. How important, therefore, to learn from the Scriptures and praise God for the heart of our faith: his character of justice and mercy, of judgment and deliverance.

We said earlier: If you love your wife, tell her. And tell her why.

So with God: if you love God, tell him. And tell him why.

So, if you believe God is sovereign, praise him for his rule in your life.

If you know that God has saved you through the death of Jesus, praise him for that.

If you believe that one day God will destroy all that is opposed to him, praise him for his justice.

Soak yourself in the Scriptures, and in the God of the Scriptures, and let those Scriptures make us a people of praise.