

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE PHILANTHROPY OF GOD

Introduction: As you read this psalm, pay special attention to how God acts so generously toward all of his creation, and only according to the free counsel of his will. He does not run out of resources to give, nor can anyone tell him how to distribute his gracious gifts. This is why the ancient church father John Chrysostom appropriately ascribed the Greek title of Philanthropos to God. This word comes from Greek roots meaning “love” and “man,” and it simply refers to The God who loves Man. As we will see, Psalm 65 shows that God does not love all people in the same way, but we only need to look around at the overwhelming bounty of creation to see that God does love all people to an astonishingly wondrous degree.

1. 65:1-5 The Lord’s Redemptive Grace

- a. The first five verses of Psalm 65 focus on God’s special love for his elect, though verse 2 does suggest a wider scope that we will see come to fruition later in the psalm.
- b. Verse 1 describes God’s people as eager to worship and obey him. The following verses explain their motives.
 - i. The first reason is given in verse 2: the God of Israel does actually hear their prayers. He has provided and fought for them again and again.¹
 - ii. The second reason, in verse 3, is even more personal and more powerful: “When iniquities prevail against **me**, you atone for our transgressions.” That “me” is the only place in this entire psalm where David uses the first person singular. In other words, this is the only place where he talks about himself specifically, distinct from the rest of Israel, and it is to highlight his sin.
 1. Mature believers often speak this way, as if their sin is the greatest sin in the world, because they are more acutely aware of how deep the roots of sin run throughout their own hearts.²
 2. A common temptation is to respond to this sense of your own sin by comparing yourself to others and thinking, “I’m not *that* bad.” This is foolish because it is measuring ourselves against an irrelevant standard (the behavior of others)

¹ 1 Samuel 1:1-20 may not have been specifically on David’s mind when writing this psalm, but it provides a perfect example of the Lord answering the kind of prayer that David means here. Hannah prays desperately for a son from the Lord, making a vow to give him to the Lord’s service. She receives her request and then gives Samuel back

² For example, consider Paul’s words to Timothy, “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom **I am the foremost**. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as **the foremost**, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

rather than God's eternal Law. The wise response is to freely confess your sins and rest in God's promises of forgiveness, as this psalm does.³

- c. David says in verse 3 that God makes atonement for his people, but Leviticus says repeatedly that the priests were to make atonement by their sacrifices,⁴ so which is it?
 - i. The answer lies in the fact that the priests were mediators, representing the people before God and representing God before the people. When they followed God's instructions correctly and made atonement for the people, it was God acting through them that gave that atonement actual power.
 - ii. Unlike in pagan religion, where animal sacrifices were believed to have inherent power to attract and satisfy the gods, the God of Israel's justice could not be satisfied with mere animals. To take the life of an animal in the place of a man would not be truly an eye for eye, a tooth for a tooth. Therefore animal sacrifices were only effective because they were *signs* of the sacrifice Christ would provide in the fullness of time.⁵ This once-and-for-all, final atonement was made unilaterally by our triune God, without the mediation of the Levitical priesthood.⁶
- d. Verse 4 makes it clear that his people did not initiate this relationship. God *chose* them and *drew* them near to him, in the courts of his house. This is very literally true in the case of the Israelites, of course, as God chose them in Abraham and drew them out of Egypt through Moses.⁷ But it is also very clearly true of New Testament Christians, chosen in Christ by the Father's decree and the Spirit's urging us to faith.⁸
- e. Verse 5 praises the Lord for the way he has fulfilled his covenant promises to his people.
 - i. God does not do merely the bare minimum at the last minute to get out of his commitments. He brings his vast and awe-inspiring power to bear on behalf of his people, in ways that shock and even terrify the Gentiles.⁹

³ As Martin Luther wrote, "So when the devil throws your sins in your face and declares that you deserve death and hell, tell him this: "I admit that I deserve death and hell, what of it? For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction on my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, Son of God, and where He is there I shall be also!" - *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert, pg 86-87.

⁴ For example, "And he shall bathe his body in water in a holy place and put on his garments and come out and offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people and **make atonement** for himself and for the people." - Leviticus 16:24

⁵ For example, as the author of Hebrews says, "And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." - 10:11-14

⁶ Note how Hebrews 9 says each person of the Trinity was involved in Christ's atonement: "For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God." - 9:13-14

⁷ Consider the achingly beautiful description of the Lord's love for Israel, like a mother eagle cares for her chicks, in Deuteronomy 32:9-12, "But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the LORD alone guided him, no foreign god was with him."

⁸ This should remind us of other passages about election and effectual calling, such as Galatians 1:15, "But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace," or John 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day."

⁹ For example, as Rahab tells the spies, "I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath." - Joshua 2:9-10

- ii. By “the hope of all the ends of the earth” David does not mean that God will treat everyone on earth the same way he treats Israel. He had, after all, just drawn a distinction between them and everyone else by calling them God’s chosen. The fact that the “farthest seas” are parallel with the “ends of the earth” here strongly suggests that David is literally thinking about the creation as a whole. The sense of what he means by God being “the hope” of the creation, then, would be that God keeps his commitments with the creation just like he does with his people. There are many other passages of Scripture that draw a similar analogy.¹⁰

2. 65:6-8 The Creator’s Sovereignty

- a. The middle part of the psalm makes God’s awesome power as the Creator the proof of his sovereignty over all of the creation.
 - i. Remember that in most ancient religions, various gods were responsible for creating and ruling over very specific parts of the world. The Egyptians, Greeks, Babylonians, etc. all had gods for the Sun, the rain, the seas, fertility, and so on, but Israel’s God claims every square inch of the creation as his work and therefore it is *all* his kingdom.
 - ii. Verses 5 and 6 together show that it is the same power of God in both creation (of the mountains in this case) and in providence (restraining the seas so that they do not overwhelm the dry land). God did not set up the universe as a clock and then let it run. He is actively involved in working through natural means to manage this world.
- b. The phrase, “the tumult of the peoples” is particularly interesting and worth meditating on. David is saying that God rules and restrains all human societies whether they recognize him or not, just as he rules the natural world.
 - i. The way he parallels the “roaring of the waves” with the “tumult of the peoples” creates a powerful mental image: if humanity went on sinning without God’s gracious restraints, there would be a devastating flood of self-destruction. In fact, this parallel suggests to us just how fitting Noah’s Flood was, as a punishment for the tidal wave of violence that had swept over God’s creation.¹¹
 - ii. God restrains human evil by various earthly institutions which do not fundamentally change our sin nature, but which restrain or redirect our sinful desires to preserve some level of stability. These include government¹² and marriage,¹³ for two examples, inasmuch as they make people more reluctant to sin as egregiously as they otherwise would.
- c. Verse 8 describes people all over the earth being struck with wonder at the marvels of God’s creation.

¹⁰ For example, “Thus says the LORD: If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, then also my covenant with David my servant may be broken, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and my covenant with the Levitical priests my ministers.” - Jeremiah 33:21. Or, looking to the creation’s hope of redemption when Christ returns, “For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” - Romans 8:22-23

¹¹ If ever there was an uncontrolled “tumult of the peoples” it was before the Flood: “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence.” - Genesis 6:11

¹² “For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” - Romans 13:3-4

¹³ “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” - Genesis 2:24

- i. The problem, of course, is that sinners refuse to see them as signs of the transcendent Creator's power. Human beings all over the world have chosen to channel this awe toward worship of the creature itself rather than seeing the Creator through his signs. Even so, the fact that they are struck with awe demonstrates the Creator's majesty and power.
- ii. "the going out of the morning and the evening" in the second half of verse 8 should be understood to refer symbolically to people living far to the east (towards the sunrise, from Israel's perspective) as well as far to the west (sunset). The idea is that people rejoice to behold the beauty of God's creation, and perhaps especially sunrises and sunsets!

3. 65:9-13 God's Common Grace

- a. Notice just how extravagantly generous God is with his whole creation. David wants to make clear that God does not just give us strictly what we need to barely survive; his common grace is breathtaking in its scope and abundance.
 - i. God *greatly* enriches the earth with rain. He fills great rivers with water to nourish all life on earth, according to verse 9. God does not just give daily bread to those who pray the Lord's Prayer, but to *all peoples*, even though they hate him.
 - ii. Verses 10 and 11 take this imagery even further and portray God as a farmer, but a farmer who absolutely drenches his land in more water than any other could afford. By these providential blessings, God's farmland produces so much when harvest time comes at the end of the year that it takes an uncountable number of wagons to carry them all: "your wagon tracks overflow with abundance."
- b. Verses 12 and 13 portray the natural world rejoicing in gratitude for God's fantastical generosity.
 - i. This provides a perfect mirror to the praise of God's people for his saving grace, with which the psalm began, in verses 1-2. Just as God's people love to sing his praises because of his atonement for their sins, the natural world is portrayed figuratively as shouting and singing together for joy.
 - ii. This likely represents those moments where you try to take in and marvel at the harmony of God's creation, and how all its parts work together in such a wonderful way that it had to be meticulously planned by a Designer. It truly seems sometimes like a great dance where everyone knows his or her part to play.
- c. Taken all together, the final section of psalm 65 shows that God's common grace is similar to, but also distinct from, his saving grace.
 - i. God's common grace does not redeem; it preserves and restrains instead, but the way these two parts of the psalm reflect each other does demonstrate continuity between the two. Both God's saving his people and his generous provision for all humanity flow from what John Chrysostom called God's *philanthropy*. That is, his love for the human race as his image-bearers.
 - ii. We would be negligent not to take note that Jesus makes this generosity of God the motivation for our love of our enemies.¹⁴ Indeed, this has been one of the most helpful

¹⁴ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax

teachings of the Bible for me to meditate on whenever I know I am called to love someone from whom I would prefer to stay far, far away. Read passages of Scripture like this one, Psalm 65, marvel at the awesome goodness of your God, and then turn and show some of that generous spirit to others.

- d. These observations strongly imply a “two kingdoms” view of the way God administers the world and his own people.
 - i. This does not imply any contradiction or schizophrenia in God. Human monarchs have often ruled multiple kingdoms, following different methods of administration for each, so there is no reason why God is not capable of doing likewise. Unless you want to claim that God gives saving grace to all, or that he gives the gifts of food and rain only to the elect, then it seems to me that you have to arrive at *some version* of a “two kingdoms” position.
 - ii. Under common grace, we see God generously administer gifts to everyone, believer and unbeliever, as well as restraining the evil of the world so that it is not as bad as it could be. He administers this kingdom invisibly, by natural means, with the shameful result that God’s creatures take his gifts for granted and add to their condemnation.
 - iii. By his saving grace, on the other hand, he chooses those whom he will forgive, makes atonement for their sins, and draws them near to live with him in his house. He administers this latter kingdom by the audible means of the preaching of his Word, and by the visible means of the Supper and Baptism, which are supernaturally empowered by his Spirit. It is a more direct and intimate relationship, which is our highest privilege to enjoy, and which leads us irrevocably toward everlasting life in the New Heavens and the New Earth.¹⁵

- e. God’s common grace offers you no excuse to ignore his Law and his Gospel.
 - i. God’s general “philanthropy” gives you time to repent and trust in God’s saving grace, but if you pour contempt on his calling, you are only adding to your everlasting punishment.¹⁶ Do not delay! Put your faith in his Son and prove that you were invisibly called and drawn near to him. Then you will know the joy of God’s fellowship with his own people, wanting to sing like David, “When iniquities prevail against me, you atone for our transgressions. Blessed is the one you choose and bring near, to dwell in your courts! We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, the holiness of your temple! - Psalm 65:4

collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers,[fn] what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” - Matthew 5:43-48

¹⁵ Notice how John’s vision of the New Jerusalem emphasizes God’s dwelling with his people in love, “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”- Revelation 21:3-4

¹⁶ For example, as Peter says, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.” - 2 Peter 3:9-10