

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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The Lord's Call to Worship

Introduction: Does it seem strange to have a psalm - a song designed to be sung by God's people - that is addressed to the singers? Texts like this psalm are the basis for the idea of beginning our public worship with a Call to Worship. We cannot just casually come into God's presence whenever we please, as if the Creator of the Universe is beneath us or on our same level.¹ Therefore Reformed churches begin worship with a formal Call, taken from a text of Scripture, and a song that, like Psalm 100, reminds us why we ought to worship.

1. Speaking of our motive for worship, notice that the psalm refers to itself as "A psalm for giving thanks." This is actually unique to this psalm. There are plenty of other psalms that commentators call "psalms of thanksgiving" because they primarily feature giving thanks to God, but Psalm 100 is the only psalm that calls *itself* that.
 - a. This is an important reminder that *all our worship*, even if we are not explicitly saying "thank you," should be in a spirit of thankfulness. Why? Because the very fact that we have been summoned to worship our Creator, rather than to be judged, is the greatest of honors.
 - b. In Reformed theology, we often refer to all of Christian obedience as acts of gratitude. Psalm 100 cannot prove that point by itself, of course, but it does show that the most important acts of Christian obedience, which all fall under worship, are inherently acts of gratitude.²
2. Psalm 100 contains seven commands: "Make a joyful noise..." "Serve..." "Come..." "Know..." "Enter his gates..." "Give thanks..." "Bless..." There are a few things we should notice about these commands.
 - a. The commands in verses 1 and 2 emphasize that we are to have **gladness** and **joy** when we come before God's presence. By itself, of course, being told to just be happy is not likely to actually help anyone's mood. But the psalmist does not just tell God's people to be happier; he gives us good reasons to rejoice! The reminders in verses 3 and 5 are that God is 1) our creator, 2) our personal redeemer who has bound himself to us, and 3) unchangeably good and faithful. These verses, although brief, give us an excellent summary of our main reasons to feel joy in God's presence. Whatever our trials and

¹ This distance between us and our Creator is also the reason why God makes covenants with his creatures, and worship itself is regularly rehearsing and reinforcing our covenant with God. "The distance between God and the creature is so great that, although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant." - Westminster Confession of Faith, VII.1

² For example, see Heidelberg Catechism question 116: "Why is prayer necessary for Christians? Because prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness which God requires of us. Moreover, God will give his grace and the Holy Spirit only to those who constantly and with heartfelt longing ask him for these gifts and thank him for them."

tribulations may be, how can they compare with this great God giving himself to us in covenant?³

- b. The commands to come into God's presence is a reminder that Psalm 100 is primarily talking about *public* worship, not praying in your home. In the Old Testament, this would of course mean gathering at the Tabernacle (sometimes also called the Tent of **Meeting**) and later, the Temple at Jerusalem. The references to his "gates" and "courts" in verse 4 make this even clearer.
 - i. God's relationship with his people is defined by the fact that he lives in their midst and they assemble regularly before him for worship. This is why Jonah longs to return to the Temple when he is in the belly of the fish,⁴ and also why its rebuilding is so important for the exiles returning from Babylon.⁵
 - ii. Most importantly, this is why the New Testament's ordinary word for the Church is *ekklesia*. You will often hear preachers say this word means "called ones," which is based on its etymology, but it is also important to know that this Greek word was commonly used to mean political assemblies. Most famously, *ekklesia* was the word which the Athenians used for their regular citizens' assembly, the historic root of western democracy. We certainly cannot apply every association with the Greek word to the Church, but it is fascinating that the Apostles did not use more religious Greek words to describe Christ's people. The significance of this connection is that when we meet for worship, we should see it as a formal meeting, called by our King, for the governing of his Kingdom. The pagans did not see worship as a dialogue with a deity who had personally bound himself to his worshipers like a king to his subjects, but for us, worship is assembling for the business of the Kingdom of God. It is what we were created for, both individually and as a "nation of priests."⁶
3. Psalm 100 gives reasons for us to worship, as all good Calls to Worship do. These reasons can be classified under two basic headings: 1) who God is, and 2) what he has done for us.
 - a. Verse 3 says that "the Lord, he is God." This may seem redundant, but it is a reminder that unlike all the nations around her, Israel has a *singular* God.⁷ This same verse also reminds them that they have an exclusive relationship with this unique God, as he made them to be *his*, and he is *their* God.⁸ The phrase, "sheep of his pasture" in particular should bring to our minds all that Psalm 23 famously says about God's tender care for believers.

³ "Do not be afraid of slavery to this Lord of ours; there will be no complaining among his slaves, no grumbling, no resentment. No one begs to be emancipated from that service, because it is so delightful that all of us have been redeemed." - Augustine, *Psalms*, 5:18.

⁴ "Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.'" - Jonah 2:4.

⁵ See Cyrus's decree in Ezra 1:2-4, "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem."

⁶ "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." - 1 Peter 2:9

⁷ Similar to the famous Shema prayer in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." If you worship many gods, you have to divide your devotion up between them, but if there is just one true God who made and rules over all things, he deserves *all* of your devotion.

⁸ This language is based on God's repeated covenant promises throughout Scripture, that he will be their God and they will be his people, representing a unique and intimate relationship that no one else has with the Lord. See, among other texts, Genesis 17:7, Exodus 6:7, Ezekiel 34:24, Ezekiel 36:28, Jeremiah 7:23, 30:22, 31:33, 2 Corinthians 6:16, Revelation 21:3.

- b. Verse 5 focuses more on God's character, *who he is*, as why he deserves to be worshiped. These attributes of God are the foundation of his treatment of us his people. He does what he does for us because he is who he is.
 - i. First of all, it says he is really and fundamentally **good**. Not in a relative sense, like some things are better or worse in this life but nothing is perfect. The psalmist means that God is absolutely good; in fact he defines what goodness itself *is*. This might make some wonder how it can be "good" for God to demand worship and glory for himself, as it would be vain for us to do the same. But the Lord actually does deserve worship, since he actually is our superior in every conceivable way. What is more, the persons of the Trinity glorify one another,⁹ and God *shares his glory with us!*¹⁰ So even God's desire for glory is really not selfish, any more than it is selfish for a mother to make food for herself at the same time as her children.
 - ii. Secondly, this pure goodness shows itself in "steadfast love" and "faithfulness" to his people. The Lord is the polar opposite of a fickle, arbitrary man who gives his word without thinking and breaks it just as easily. When the Lord has given you a promise, it is absolutely rock solid, even more dependable than the sun, moon, or stars and their cycles.¹¹
4. People often ask how we can be so sure Reformed worship is biblical when the Bible doesn't lay out an exact order of service for us. The answer is that we look at the ways God has his people worship in Scripture and reflect on the principles at work there. Then we design an order of worship that reflects who God is and what he has made us to be. In this case, Psalm 100 teaches us a couple of essential principles for ordering public worship.
 - a. First, worship is not just our speech to God. It is essential that God also speaks to us, through his ministers reading and preaching his Word.¹² Otherwise, if he did not say anything, we could not be sure our King is truly meeting with us! Private revelations also would not do in this case, because they need to be clearly and objectively established for *everyone* present.
 - b. Second, the Lord must call us. We cannot come into his presence uninvited. He must summon us first, much like Esther tells us nobody could just show up at King Ahasuerus's court, except God *actually deserves* this extreme level of deference, infinitely more than any human ruler. Based on this principle, we have the Call to Worship and a hymn which responds to it before anything else.¹³

5. How can we be prepared to answer this great King's summons? How should we present ourselves? The problem is, on our own, we would drag the filth of our sin before him and he

⁹ For example, John 17 reveals that God the Father and the Son had a mutual agreement to glorify each other in their plan of redemption: "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed." - John 17:4-5

¹⁰ Later in the same chapter, Christ says he has given the glory of God to his disciples: "The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one," - John 17:22

¹¹ "Thus says the LORD: If I have not established my covenant with day and night and the fixed order of heaven and earth, then I will reject the offspring of Jacob and David my servant and will not choose one of his offspring to rule over the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes and will have mercy on them." - Jeremiah 33:25-26

¹² "The call to worship is not just a way to begin the service; it's not even a way to reorient our minds to thinking of God, though it should do that. It is preeminently God through the minister calling His people into a covenantal relationship, a covenantal conversation. To say that the call to worship is anything less is to make a massive understatement of what is happening when we worship. When we worship God calls us - he demands that we enter into his presence and have dealings with him." - Jonathan Landry Cruse, *What Happens When We Worship*, 110.

¹³ This does not mean, of course, that God rejects the worship of all churches that do not have a formal Call to Worship. In Christ, God has mercy on countless believers who come into his presence with improper worship. Nevertheless, it clearly gives God more glory and will also benefit our own souls more if we reflect on how God would have us order our worship and act accordingly.

could not tolerate it in his holy presence. Zechariah 3 gives us a picture of this problem, as well as the solution.

- a. In this vision, Zechariah sees the high priest of Israel standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan accusing him of being unworthy. The problem is Satan's accusations aren't entirely false: the high priest has come before the Lord with filthy garments. The priests' clothing rules were extremely strict, so it is a major scandal for none other than the high priest to turn up for duty, as it were, out of uniform.¹⁴
- b. The only thing that could save his life in this scenario is what Zechariah sees next: the Angel of the Lord calls the high priest "a brand plucked from the fire" and actually gives him pure clothes to wear. It is 100% the mercy of God, and nothing in the high priest himself, that saves him and makes him worthy to stand in the Lord's presence.
- c. Similarly, the only way for us to answer this divine call and come boldly before the throne of God is with faith in Christ.¹⁵ Zechariah 3's final verses actually pivot from this vision to a direct prophecy of Christ, making the fulfillment explicit: the one who will remove the iniquity of God's people, like Joshua's filthy clothes, is his anointed Messiah.¹⁶
- d. This vision from Zechariah is a beautiful image of what we need to answer God's Call to Worship: to be clothed by Jesus Christ, with the righteousness he earned for our sakes. With his merits applied to our account, we can truly enter into God's throne room with confidence that he has sincerely invited us and wants to hear from us.¹⁷ In doing this, we enjoy blessed, sweet communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a wonderful foretaste of everlasting life in the New Creation.¹⁸

¹⁴ See Exodus 28 for the detailed description of how the priests' garments were to be made, and Leviticus 8 for their official consecration. The quality and cleanliness of these clothes were of the utmost importance!

¹⁵ "Specifically for Psalm 100, the invitation and call to come into the presence of God finds its fulfillment when Jesus Christ opens for us 'the new and living way' (Heb 10:20) into the presence of God and 'bring[s] us to God' (1 Pet. 3:18); it is by Jesus, and only by Jesus, that men and women can accept the invitation of Psalm 100." - Christopher Ash, *The Psalms: A Christ-centered Commentary*, 651.

¹⁶ "Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign: behold, I will bring **my servant the Branch**. For behold, on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, declares the LORD of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day. In that day, declares the LORD of hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbor to come under his vine and under his fig tree." - Zechariah 3:8-10

¹⁷ "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." - Hebrews 4:14-16

¹⁸ "No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever." - Revelation 22:4-5