

A Command to Worship

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Preacher: Mark Chew

- [0 : 0 0] Psalm 81. Well, I'm sure that if you're a regular churchgoer, there will be times in your life when you come to church not really feeling like worshipping God.
- Maybe that's you this week. It's been a hard week. Life has been challenging. And the last thing you want to do is come and sing happy, clappy praise songs.
- Not that we have any of those. We only have deep theological praise songs. Songs that extol God's goodness and favour on us.
- Right? And you didn't get to choose the songs. Susan did it for us this week. What then? Do you stay away? Do you come and go through the motions?
- Perhaps put on a fake smile? And what if the psalm that is being preached on happened to be Psalm 81, which begins with a command to shout for joy?
- [1 : 1 0] Well, bad news. That's today. Slightly awkward if you don't feel like worshipping God. And you may be tempted to walk straight out.
- But please, let me encourage you to stay. Let's work out what God has to say about praising and worshipping Him regardless of life's circumstances.
- So let's start with verse 1, which essentially the first five verses are a command to worship. So, sing for joy to God our strength.
- Shout aloud to the God of Jacob. Begin the music. Strike the timbrel. Play the melodious harp and lyre. Sound the ram's horn at the new moon.
- And when the moon is full on the day of our festival. This is a decree for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob. When God went out against Egypt, He established it as a statute for Joseph.
- [2 : 1 3] And so you see, it's not simply a call to worship, is it? But a command. Because three times we are told it's a decree, it's an ordinance, and a statute.
- Now again, Joseph is singled out for reference, like Psalm 80 last week. And I think it's because there's again an emphasis on Egypt.
- Joseph was the leader among his brothers during that part of Israel's history. But we're told here to praise God as a command.
- And the verbs that come are all in the imperative. Explicit directions to shout, to sing, to strike up the band and make, you know, as loud a sound as possible.
- And look at the array of instruments. There's string, there's percussion, and the loudest of all, the ram's horn. I tried my best to get the ram's horn tonight.
- [3 : 1 1] But the best I got was, very good by the way, is Isaac's saxophone. It sounds a bit like the ram's horn. I did ask him whether he would come up and, you know, pretend that it's a chauffeur.
- But, by the way, the ram's horn is, as you see there, it's a chauffeur, not the one that drives your car. But essentially, what the ram's horn is, they do, is they hollow it out so that it can be used as a trumpet.

And, you know, this is a loud instrument. It can be heard for miles around. It's like when, you know, they used to ring the church bell. Eric, do you recall if we used to ring the church bell?

Okay, yeah. I did ask, I think, did think Eric would be here long enough to remember that. But we ring the bell to gather people to come, like the village church bell rings.

Or a bit like the Muslims call to prayer on the minaret. That's what the ram's horn does. Now, in verse 3, there's a reference here to the new moon, which is, you know, as you know, the first day of the lunar month.

[4 : 18] If you read Leviticus chapter 23 and verse 24, in the seventh month of the first day of the seventh month, that actually is the day of the festival of the trumpets.

And so I think that's what is being referenced here, where the ram's horn comes in. Then it says on the 15th day of the seventh month, and that's the full moon, which marks the start of the festival of tabernacles, which you can read also in Leviticus chapter 23 and verse 33.

And so this festival is significant because it celebrates God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt. During this festival, they slept in tents as a way of reminding themselves that they lived in temporary shelters when God brought them out of Egypt.

So this reference here gives us a reason for the singing and the celebrating. It's to commemorate God's rescue of Israel from Egypt. Or as it says in verse 5, when God went out against Egypt, that is, went out and defeated them in battle.

And so you see, the people of Israel, at any given time, may have their own troubles in life. Maybe they're personal to their family or their clan, or there might have been a national crisis, a famine, perhaps, or a war with enemies around them.

[5 : 41] But God wants them to know it's still important for them to keep life in perspective. Because whatever their troubles, it was still better than them being slaves in Egypt, from which God had saved them.

Life may be hard for them at the moment, but it could have been much worse in Egypt. Because there, they were oppressed without any hope of freedom. There, their very basic human rights were taken away from them.

And here we read in verse 6 and 7 how God recounts this experience. It says, I heard an unknown voice say, I removed the burden from their shoulders.

Their hands were set free from the basket. In your distress you called and I rescued you. I answered you out of the thundercloud. I tested you at the waters of Meribah.

Now it's not clear why God's voice here is unknown. Some translations have it as unknown language. But whatever it may mean, it points to God's voice not being yet recognizable by the people of Israel.

[6 : 52] And yet, though they did not know Him, God brought Himself, brought them to Him. He removed their burdens and freed them from the basket.

That is, the laborer's basket which they used to carry bricks that the Pharaoh forced them to make against their will. In their distress they called, perhaps not even knowing who they were calling out to.

But God rescued them anyway. Made Himself known to them from Mount Sinai in the cloud of thunder. And then when they cried out from the lack of water, God supplied them.

That was at the rock of Meribah. And so we can learn the same lesson too, can't we? As Christians whom God has rescued in His Son, we may have other, you know, and some of them are difficult trials that we face.

But even though they are hard, they do pale into comparison when we consider the eternal death and judgment from which we have been saved.

[8 : 0 0] Thus, as the psalm opens, we are encouraged to cast our vision wider than the present circumstances of life. God is asking us to look at what He has done for us in Christ Jesus, which overwhelms whatever troubles that we may have in our circumstances.

And so God gives these instructions for His people to gather at festivals and at other regular assemblies, and this was for their good. It helped them to practice looking beyond life's challenges and to remember God's biggest rescue of them, which they were still enjoying because they were freed from Egypt and they were living in the land of Canaan.

Life may still be difficult in the land of Canaan, but how much more would they be if they were still in Egypt under Pharaoh's oppression? And so, you know, as a church, this is what we can do as well.

The church has its own big festivals in the form of Easter and Christmas. And, you know, I know the rest of the world celebrates it as well by eating, you know, bunny chocolates at Easter or stuffed turkey at Christmas.

All of things which you can enjoy too. By the way, I'm not saying don't do them. But we also mark these occasions, don't we, by shouting for joy that God has saved us in His Son, Jesus.

[9 : 3 2] And as we come each Sunday to church, and sometimes we will celebrate the Lord's Supper as well, that's another opportunity, isn't it, together each week to sing and shout as we remember our Savior, Jesus.

And you see, I think God knows us better than we do. We often think that, you know, if only God would solve my problem right now, that's the way I will feel better.

But actually, God has another way. He lifts our spirits. He comforts us by urging us to lift up our eyes and to focus on the big picture of what He's done for all of us across history, for all our lives.

And put that in perspective to some of our problems that we have today. Not to say that the problems aren't big. Not to say that they're not difficult. But there's a bigger picture, a bigger victory that gives us a much bigger comfort because we know what God has done for us for all eternity.

And so while we come to church and we may not still have that feeling of joy, that spring in the step, that's okay. We can turn our eyes, lift our eyes to that eternal salvation.

[1 0 : 5 2] And, you know, as we allow the words of God, the songs we sing, as we meditate on that, then perhaps God could use those things to comfort us.

Because, you know, thanks be to God, the reality of what God has done for us and saved us from, Jesus' victory over death on the cross, that can never be taken from us.

No one can snatch away that salvation. And no one can snatch us away from Jesus when we put our trust in Him.

And so we ought to anchor our lives on that truth and remind ourselves regularly. And when we come together to then sing praise to Him.

Now the alternative is, as Israel did do, unfortunately, look to other gods and things for help and relief. Forget who God is and therefore stop worshipping Him.

[1 1 : 5 6] And again, that's something we can be prone to. So the psalmist continues giving us a warning, or God is giving us that warning directly, not to forget about Him. So verse 8, Hear me, my people, and I will warn you.

If you would only listen to me, Israel, you shall have no foreign god among you. You shall not worship any god other than me. I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of Egypt.

Open wide your mouth and I will fill it. Now if you remember, last week in Psalm 80, the psalmist was pleading to God, Hear us. Well this week, it's sort of the other way around, isn't it?

Because God then says, You hear me. God is firstly addressing again Israel at the time of the Exodus because even though God had rescued them, they very quickly went wayward.

They forgot. And so we read in verse 7 that God tested them, or they tested him as well at Meribah. That is, they grumbled about not having water and food and even complained and said, Look, Lord, bring us back to Egypt.

[13 : 03] At least we had food there. But God warns them at Mount Sinai again as they were wandering in the wilderness. Listen to my voice.

And essentially, if you look at the book of Deuteronomy, that was God's main message. Listen to me and obey the law I've given you through Moses. And key among these commands is the first commandment to worship God alone and no other gods.

Now it is interesting that God's appeal here is not based on the fact that the other gods were false, which that's true, isn't it? All the other gods are merely idols.

But rather, God appeals to them on the basis of His covenantal relationship with them. That is, Worship me because I've chosen you and made you my own.

Worship me because I have rescued you from Egypt. I've entered into a loving and gracious relationship with you. Worship me because of that and be loyal.

[14 : 06] And that's a very different motivation, isn't it? I don't know about you, but I tend to obey the laws of this land for a rather, shall we say, pragmatic and impersonal reason.

I don't want to go to jail. But when it comes to our parents and if you're parents to your children, the motivation is very different, hopefully, isn't it? We obey our parents because they love us.

They fed us since we're young and brought us up. They stock our freezer with lots of ice cream treats. They take us on holidays.

And that's the same with God, isn't it? And Israel. They are motivated to obey because God has loved them. It's a relationship of trust and love. And God even goes so far as to promise in verse 10, listen to me, worship me, and I will continue to feed you and bless you in the land.

Now, it may appear transactional, but it's not the case because it's based on love and trust. I have saved you before, God says. I will keep providing for you in the future. Now, sadly, verse 11 tells us that Israel didn't do that.

[15 : 23] For it says, but my people would not listen to me. Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices. And you see, that's the way God works, isn't it?

Because a relationship based on love and trust is never coercive, is it? God never forces his people to worship him. Yes, the command is clear, but if we choose to disobey, well, then God says he gives us over to our stubborn hearts and lets us follow our own devices.

Israel, in this case, suffered the consequences of their own choices. Now, again, you might wonder, when God has done so much for Israel, why would they not follow God?

Why was it so hard? Well, that's the nature of temptation, isn't it? Because when they entered the land, they started to see all the other gods.

They lived by sight. There were all these graven images of these other gods around them. Whereas God, on the other hand, well, they couldn't see. They had to actually worship him based on trust, based on his word alone.

[16 : 32] Well, even though Israel was stubborn, we continue to read that God is always ready to forgive. And so, time and time again, Israel lived out verse 11.

They failed to listen to God, not just at the time of the Exodus, but throughout their time in the land. And yet, God still holds out the promise to save and provide for them, if only his people would simply turn back and follow him.

So, verse 13, if my people would only listen to me, if Israel would only follow my ways, how quickly I would subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes.

These are beautiful words, aren't they? Because the words only and quickly show it doesn't take a lot, does it, for God to act. If they would only listen, that's all it took.

If they would only follow my ways. And they don't even have to second guess what God wants because his ways are clearly laid out for them. But if they would only listen, then God would quickly subdue their enemies and turn his hand against their foes.

[17 : 42] You know, we all know that a good teacher gives clear instructions and guidelines when it comes to doing assignments. Yeah? Remember those teachers that never told you what they wanted?

That's frustrating, isn't it? But a good teacher means that if a student followed those instructions and did what they were told, then they would get a good mark.

Their efforts will be rewarded. Well, God's laws for us are clear, aren't they? God says they only need to listen and follow. Very clear.

And he will quickly subdue their enemies. And part of these instructions are actually the commands in verse 1 to 3 to praise and shout aloud to God, to sound the horn for the festivals.

In other words, acknowledge who God is. Praise him as their God and saviour. Remember what he's done for them. And that's the same with us, isn't it?

[18 : 43] That God doesn't expect us to do impossible things, isn't it? What he wants us to do is simply to turn back to him, to praise him, to acknowledge who he is, what Jesus has done for us, and to put our faith in him.

And then, yes, even if we do have to wait as God then works out some of these problems in our lives, well, we have the promise that he will.

Verse 15 goes on to say that he will bring justice. Those who hate the Lord would cringe before him and their punishment, that is, God's justice on them would last forever. On the other hand, those who follow the Lord's ways, well, here's the great promise, you would be fed with the finest of wheat, with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.

Now, I want to pause here because there is a danger in too quickly thinking that just because someone is against us, that is, we're their enemies, enemies, that God would then quickly punish them for us.

Now, we need to be careful not to over-personalize these verses because the promise is not to our personal enemies, all right, that's not God's promise to us, but rather to the enemies of God's people.

[20 : 06] And sometimes, you know, those people that are actually your so-called enemies, well, they may actually also belong to God's people. And so in that case, you might go, well, is God for them or is God for us?

Well, the answer is neither. It's not whether God is on your side, but more whether you are on God's side. Because the ultimate test is whether you, I, they, hate, that is, reject the Lord or not.

And if they hate God's people as a result of rejecting the Lord, well, then that will be part of God's judgment of them. Because God's possession are his people.

And he takes it personally in that sense because these are my people. But ultimately that judgment is for God to make, isn't it? And sometimes it may not come in this life, but it will certainly come at the end of the age.

And so in that sense, what we need to take care to do, all of us, is to apply verse 15 even to ourselves, not to be people who reject the Lord.

[21 : 21] Whether we show animosity to God's people or not, the litmus test is whether we ourselves hate the Lord, that is, reject him, don't follow his ways.

God will walk in the Lord.

He's to feed us and satisfy us. More than honey, more than the finest of wheat, God will satisfy us with himself by giving us his spirit and then ultimately bringing us into his presence in the new creation.

But friends, if you're here today and you're visiting, if God's voice to you is like what the psalmist says, still unknown, then well, let me encourage you to consider what the psalmist says.

To come and recognize that it is God who is speaking. That you only need to listen to him and follow his ways to put your trust in his son Jesus.

[22 : 26] And this same satisfaction and salvation will be yours as well. But for the rest of us, those of us who are following in the Lord, well, let me encourage us then as we begin the new year to make it our habit to come together, even through the week by ourselves, whatever the circumstances, even though, yes, it may be hard to shout for joy to God our strength.

Let us lift our eyes beyond the troubles of this life to see that God is there. That he's already won the victory for us in Christ Jesus.

That we are safe for eternity. And then allow that to comfort us even in our troubles. For Paul, writing in Romans 8, which Nathan read for us tonight, he said this in verse 31.

If God is for us, then who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

And you know, for Paul, that meant a lot because he was facing some of the most difficult trials of his life. And yet he was secure in the knowledge of God. And he goes on to say, who shall separate us, in verse 35, from the love of Christ?

[23 : 49] Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? Verse 37. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any past, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That's a wonderful truth that we can hang on to. And that's a wonderful truth that ought to prompt us to give thanks to God. Well, let me pray and do that right now.

Father, we thank you for your love, for the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. And we praise you for all that you've done for us in his life and in his death.

Train us to be faithful worshippers of you and your son Jesus. Fill our hearts constantly with the joy of the Lord, whatever our circumstances in life.

[25 : 03] Turn our eyes towards you so that we may sing of your greatness and your goodness all the days of our lives. Teach us not to ignore your words. Teach us not to fall into the temptation of worshipping other gods apart from you.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.