

Waiting on God – Psalm 33:18-22

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Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, on those who hope for His lovingkindness, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our help and our shield. For our heart rejoices in Him, because we trust in His holy name. Let Thy lovingkindness, O LORD, be upon us, according as we have hoped in Thee. – Psalm 33:18-22

Psalm 33 is a hymn of praise to God and contrasts the sovereign plan, purpose, and power of God with mankind's perennial dependence on their own ingenuity and abilities. The contrast is summarized in verses 10 and 11, "*The LORD nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation*". Man can plan and scheme all he wants, but he inevitably carries out God's eternal plan and purpose, albeit unwittingly. Man's plans are subject to change and frustration but God's plans are as immutable as His nature, they "*stand forever*" and "*from generation to generation*". God's sovereign plan and purpose can never be thwarted, undermined, altered, amended, or delayed. God is sovereign over the means as well as the ends. All things work to bring about His eternal plan and purpose. The nations depend on themselves whereas the people of God depend on the Lord.

Humanism is a dependence on man and his abilities and ingenuity to solve the problems of life, and is essentially self-worship. But according to our passage the highest expression of worship to which God's people may attain is that of waiting for the Lord. This will come as a shock to a church culture that equates worship with entertainment, self-satisfaction, ritualism, and mere emotionalism; that ignores, minimizes, redefines, mocks, and labels as legalism biblical sanctification, and counts it a virtue to emulate the world. It is easy to fabricate a "worship experience", to fool people into thinking they are worshiping God when they are really worshiping themselves, but genuine worship cannot be so easily counterfeited.

Perhaps no other time in modern history has mankind's unbridled optimism in its own efforts – an optimism born out of the Enlightenment of the 16th and 17th centuries – been more loudly trumpeted than at the beginning of the 20th century. The Industrial Revolution had spawned a tidal wave of new inventions, labor saving devices, and consumer goods. Electrification transformed the cities and the automobile and telephone revolutionized the way people lived and interacted. New scientific discoveries seemed to hold the promise of a future utopia cleansed of all diseases. Man's ability to impact society for the better seemed limitless and it was only a matter of time before he would solve all his problems. But then World War I broke out and burst man's arrogant humanistic bubble. Mankind had turned its ingenuity on itself and used their new found knowledge to devise ever more effective ways of destroying each other. Rather than solving his problems man's ingenuity had just created different and more dangerous ones.

Not much has changed in one-hundred years. We now live in the age of information. Technology has revolutionized the way people live and interact, a multitude of diseases have

been conquered, the potential for further advances in technology are mindboggling, and man's ability to impact society for the better seem limitless. But yet mankind still suffers from the same problems it always has. Nevertheless this glaring fact has not deterred people from still clinging to their humanistic optimism that men and women have the ability and ingenuity to solve the problems which have plagued mankind since Cain killed Abel, Sarah was jealous of Hagar, Jacob lied to Isaac, Laban cheated Jacob, Joseph's brothers envied him, Israel murdered their children – all the problems of man are still with us because their source is within man where man's ingenuity is incapable of making any impact. As J. Gresham Machen pointed out almost 100 years ago, this conceited self-confidence in our own abilities,

“is based upon a grossly exaggerated estimate of the achievements of modern science. Scientific investigation...has certainly accomplished much; it has in many respects produced a new world. But there is another aspect of the picture which should not be ignored. The modern world represents in some respects an enormous improvement over the world in which our ancestors lived; but in other respects it exhibits a lamentable decline. The improvement appears in the physical conditions of life, but in the spiritual realm there is a corresponding loss....Material betterment has gone hand in hand with spiritual decline....In the midst of all the material achievements of modern life, one may well ask the question whether in gaining the whole world we have not lost our own soul.” (*Christianity and Liberalism*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1923, 9, 10, 15)

Nowhere is this lamentable decline more evident than in the impoverished worship life of the church and among professing Christians. That which a person is most dependent upon may rightly be called the object of their worship, since we are always most devoted to that on which we are most dependent. Humanism is simply self-worship and it is this worship of self that characterizes the worship of the overwhelming majority of the professing church today. The church's greatest devotion is to the latest scheme that promises to draw the largest crowd. Self-gratification is the dominant motive behind choosing a church, and everything from the music to the message is geared toward pandering to the flesh and inflating emotions and egos. The salvation offered is a salvation for which men and women, in some form or another, cooperate with God and even provide the determining factor. Moreover it is a salvation from temporal cares, worries, trials, even biblical sanctification rather than eternal damnation. The more independent and self-reliant we are the less we will look to God, the less we will trust in Him alone, the less thankful we will be for His blessings, the more careless and less concerned we will be in our obedience to Him, the more irreverent we will be in our worship, and the more sin and spiritual pride we will tolerate in our life, and the life of the church.

Men and women naturally trust in themselves and exalt themselves in all their accomplishments. It is a principle of human nature that when people live in a continuous state of ease, prosperity, and accommodation, this tends to foster a sense of independence and self-sufficiency. This principle was born out over and over again in the long, sad history of God's chosen people. When they were being harassed and persecuted by their enemies then Israel would turn to God and look to Him for deliverance, “*But as soon as they had rest, they did evil again before You*” (Nehemiah 9:26-28; cf. Judges 3:11, 12). It was this tendency to self-reliance and independence which God specifically warned Israel to avoid, “*Beware lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; lest when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and*

gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart becomes proud, and you forget the LORD your God" (Dt 8:11-14). It was a self-sufficient and independent mindset that was the downfall of the church in Laodicea, "we have become rich and have need of nothing" (Rv 3:17). How much more does this attitude pose a danger for Christians today, especially in our prosperous American culture that prizes and idolizes independence, self-reliance, entrepreneurship, and self-sufficiency, and venerates the self-made man? Self-promotion and personality cults not only permeate the atmosphere of the mega-church, but have been adopted across the board as a legitimate method for promoting church growth. The more people exalt themselves the less inclined they are to exalt God.

The value we place on God is directly proportional to the sense of dependence we have on God, and the value we place on God is reflected in our worship. If our dependence is partly on God and partly on someone or something else, then our devotion and reverence will be divided among those different things. If we are only partially dependent on God then our heart is divided between God and something or someone that is not God.

The author of Psalm 33 writes, "*Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him,*" (33:18). That word "*behold*" is meant to get our attention. This is the person to whom God directs His eye. When God focuses His eye toward someone it is to sustain and deliver them as the next psalm, Psalm 34, illustrates, "*The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry...The righteous cry and the LORD hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles*" (34:15, 17). But when God turns His eyes away or hides His eyes, it is to ignore a person's prayers and needs as God did with the nation of Israel, "*So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you, yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen*" (Is 1:15; cf. Ps 34:16; Is 59:2; Mic 3:4). God directs His eye to "*those who fear Him.*" This "*fear*" is not an abject, cringing fear of a tyrannical, capricious, and oppressive despot, but rather the word means *reverence, honor, respect, awe, astonishment*, a fact expressed previously in this psalm in verse 8, "*Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him.*" The fear of God manifests itself in a worshipful and reverent attitude toward God and His word. Through the prophet Isaiah God declares, "*But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word*" (Is 66:2). God's word should inspire awe and reverence in those who hear it and read it simply by the fact that Scripture is the very word of Almighty God, not the product of human invention. It is to such people that God directs His eye.

Contrast this with the attitude which characterizes the ungodly, "*There is no fear of God before his eyes*" (Ps 36:1-4). Ungodly people have no reverence, honor, respect, or awe for God and His word, and they demonstrate their lack of reverence when they add to, deny, or reinterpret God's word; when they deny or redefine any of God's attributes; when they deny, corrupt, or redefine biblical doctrines; when they pervert and degrade God's worship with vulgar language and crass innuendo; when they approach His word with a flippant and frivolous attitude; when they minimize the pursuit of a holy life, or when they simply choose to remain biblically illiterate. Their ungodly lack of reverence is summarized by the description "*He does not despise evil*" (Ps 36:4).

Reverence for anything has virtually disappeared in our day. Not only has reverence all but vanished, but it is openly mocked within the church. If there is one word which describes the overwhelming majority of what alleges to be worship today, that word is "*irreverent*". People have become irreverent of that which is holy because they are ignorant of God and His

holiness. Not only do many professing Christians not despise evil, but they enjoy it, at least vicariously. Evil is their primary source of entertainment. The church has even degenerated to the point where some of the most popular preachers today are those who go out of their way to be irreverent, and take pride in their irreverence. But instead of denouncing their irreverence, people will actually defend it – often vigorously – and even promote and emulate these preachers whose primary claim to fame is their tattoos, grungy wardrobe, vulgar mouth, and perpetual adolescence. The attitude of Robert Murray McCheyne who said the greatest need of his people was his personal holiness, or Charles Spurgeon who declared that if a man has not been called to holiness, he has not been called to ministry, has become obsolete and archaic today. Reverence is out, irreverence is cool.

God will never direct His eyes toward an irreverent church or an irreverent people. The words of 18th century preacher Thomas Scott are an apt depiction of the American church landscape today:

Leave out the holy character of God, the holy excellence of his law, the holy condemnation to which transgressors are doomed, the holy loveliness of the Saviour's character, the holy nature of redemption, the holy tendency of Christ's doctrine, and the holy tempers and conduct of all true believers: then dress up a scheme of religion of this unholy sort: represent mankind in a pitiable condition, rather through misfortune than crime: speak much of Christ's bleeding love to them, of his agonies in the garden and on the cross; without showing the need or the nature of satisfaction for sin: speak of his present glory, and of his compassion for poor sinners; of the freeness with which he dispenses pardon; of the privileges which believers enjoy here, and of the happiness and glory reserved for them hereafter: clog this with nothing about regeneration and sanctification, or represent holiness as somewhat different than conformity to the holy character and law of God; and you make up a plausible gospel, calculated to humour the pride, soothe the conscience, engage the hearts, and raise the affections of natural men, who love nobody but themselves. (John Scott, *Letters and Papers of the Late Reverend Thomas Scott*, John P. Haven, 1825, 289)

The psalmist equates a reverent, worshipful attitude with hoping for God's lovingkindness to meet all their needs; spiritual and physical, eternal and temporal, "*to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine*" (33:19). This stands in stark contrast to the kings of the earth who trust in their own might and power (cf. 33:16, 17). Notice the psalmist does not say that God will keep them from experiencing death and famine – He often uses these things and others to show how futile it is to trust in man – but that He will deliver from spiritual death and even in famine provide for the physical needs of "*those who hope for His lovingkindness.*" The word "*hope*" is the Hebrew word we saw in our last study, *yachal*, and means *trust, wait for, tarry, confident expectation*. It is a trust and hope that patiently waits.

Patiently waiting on God is an expression of worship; in fact it is the highest form of worship because it is the greatest acknowledgement of our total dependence on God and the utmost expression of our trust in God's nature, character, attributes, and promises, all of which are reflected in the word "*lovingkindness.*" Waiting for God reflects reverential awe, honor, and respect for God's character and the trustworthiness of His word. The object of this "*hope*" is "*His lovingkindness.*"

The Hebrew word *hesed*, translated "*lovingkindness*", is loaded with meaning. Not only does it refer to God's loving, gracious, and merciful disposition toward His own, but the primary meaning is that of *loyalty* and *faithfulness*. In Psalm 36:5, by use of synonymous parallelism,

David equates the two, “Thy *lovingkindness*, O LORD, extends to the heavens, Thy *faithfulness* reaches to the skies.” In the context of Israel’s covenant relationship with God, it was those Israelites who were faithful in their covenant obligations to God who truly feared and worshiped Him. Their primary covenant obligation was that God alone should be the sole object of their worship, which expressed itself by making God and His word the exclusive object of their trust and devotion. They were not to credit their blessings to their own efforts or their idols (cf. Dt 8:1-20; 10:12-22), they were not to rely on their own abilities and political alliances, and they dared not presume upon their privileged relationship nor His grace and mercy, rather they were to trust God to be faithful to His word, something which Israel consistently failed to do; “*And when the LORD sent you from Kadesh-barnea, saying, ‘Go up and possess the land which I have given you,’ then you rebelled against the command of the LORD your God; you neither believed Him nor listened to His voice*” (Dt 9:23).

The prophet Hosea compared Israel’s loyalty (*hesed*) to a morning cloud or dew which evaporates with the first rays of the sun (Hos 6:4). In other words, Israel’s love and devotion to God were as unstable and fleeting as an early morning mist. Their loyalty lacked any true substance and their professions of love for God were hollow. They honored God with their lips but their heart was far from Him, and their reverence consisted of nothing more than mechanical performances of religious activities (Is 29:13). To distrust God’s word, to doubt His promises, warnings, and admonitions, is to suspect God of being disloyal and unfaithful, it is to doubt His power and willingness to perform His word, it is to disparage the character of God, and it is to disbelieve that God is who He says He is. Whereas “*those who hope for* (i.e. patiently wait for) *His lovingkindness*” do so because they trust that God is God. Their waiting is a reverent, respectful, worshipful acknowledgement of the truth of God’s promises, His power to accomplish them, and His faithfulness to perform them. It is to such people that God directs His eye.

Wants, desires, and worries will compel us to pray, but only a trusting, reverent, dependent, pure love and devotion for God will motivate us to wait. Believers and unbelievers alike will pray in times of trouble and tragedy, and prayers can be offered with selfish motives (cf. Jm 4:3), but a selfish, unbelieving person will never wait for God. They will soon turn to their own ingenuity for the solution to their problems. They will invent their own methods rather than rely on God’s means. They will turn to worldly schemes to accomplish their goals. They will grow impatient with waiting on God to grant their desire or alleviate their suffering thereby revealing their irreverent unbelief in God’s word, distrust of God’s character, suspicion of His wisdom and goodness, and doubt of His ability. Believers and unbelievers can sing songs, go to church, listen to sermons, participate in religious activities, but none of these are necessarily expressions of worship. But waiting for God expresses trust in God’s character, it demonstrates honor and reverence for His word, His promises, and His prescriptions; that God’s word is reliable and He is faithful and trustworthy to perform His word – both His threats and His promises. On the other hand, to turn to our own inventions, to trust in our own abilities, to rely on our own ingenuity, and to disregard His warnings and commands is to imply that God’s ways and means, His promises, and His word are not trustworthy which is dishonoring to God and slanderous of His character. God will never direct His eyes toward those who demonstrate so little reverence for Him and His word.

Mankind’s humanistic trust in its own ability to conquer its problems remains irrepressible and undaunted, despite all the historical testimony and personal experience to the

contrary. It is a vain and futile hope, which makes it even more troubling when this humanistic optimism is the driving force behind most of the ministry today. Most of the energy is focused on coming up with some new strategy, some new way to repackage the message, some new outlandish style, or some way to be popular, not realizing that all their self-effort undermines and denies the power of the message they profess to believe.

While the rest of mankind trusts in their own ingenuity and abilities, worships its own self-effort, pursues its own lusts, and exalts its own accomplishments, we are told by our psalmist that, *“Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our help and our shield”* (33:20). What else other than unbelief would cause us to trust in our own abilities over God’s promise of divine accomplishment? How dishonoring and irreverent to place more trust in our own feeble and sin-filled schemes than God’s character and promises. This is one of the blessings of waiting on God. It takes the focus off of ourselves and places our focus on God. Our thoughts and desires are occupied with the things of God, not our own. Our trust is on God to supply our needs, not our own ingenuity. We employ His means rather than invent our own.

Regardless of our circumstances or whether or not we understand God’s ways, in spite of the times in which we live, God’s people can wait with a confident expectation that our God will care for us, that He alone is our help and our shield. Waiting pulls us into His word to study His nature and attributes, it causes us to become better students of His word so as not to misapply it and deceive ourselves, and it compels us to trust exclusively in Him and to mistrust ourselves and the wisdom and gimmickry of man. In short, we become better worshipers because we learn to know God as He is, not as we want Him to be. In waiting we assent to the truth of His promises, the certainty of their accomplishment, and the faithful character of God. We recognize our total dependence on God and expectantly wait for the help and protection only God can provide. Waiting demonstrates our reverential trust in God’s promises of help and protection and that He possesses both the faithfulness to act and the power to provide. We experience that help and protection, and we and others see His faithfulness. We have an experiential faith, not just an intellectual faith. We become doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves (Jm 1:22).

The psalmist’s confidence in God’s help and protection is the result of an understanding of who God is, *“For our heart rejoices in Him, because we trust in His holy name”* (Ps 33:21). God’s “holy name” is not just His title, but includes all that He is – His nature, His attributes, and His character. Because the psalmist understands the nature of God he can let God be God, submit to His ways, and rejoice no matter how bleak or hopeless his circumstances may appear.

It was the prophet Habakkuk’s trust in God’s faithful character that allowed him to conclude his prophecy as he did. Habakkuk was terrified when God informed him of His plan to use the Babylonians as His chastening rod upon the nation of Judah. But the more he learned about the person, power, faithfulness, and plan of God, the more he could offer unqualified praise and submission to God’s ways,

“I heard and my inward parts trembled, at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise who will invade us. Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail, and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord GOD is my strength, and He has made my feet

like hinds' feet, and makes me walk on my high places" (Hab 3:16-19).

Even in the face of certain and imminent social, religious, political, economic, and personal chaos, Habakkuk expresses unqualified submission and trust to God's ways – not a stoic resignation, but with a heart full of rejoicing because he trusts in God's holy name as revealed in His word.

Jesus had some harsh words for those who refuse to trust God's character; who look for some sort of extra-biblical confirmation of God's word, as though His character was insufficient to guarantee His word. Jesus said, *"An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign"* (Mt 12:39). Jesus identifies the character of those who look for extra-biblical confirmation of God's word. They are "evil" because the signs already performed by Jesus have not moved them to trust His words, making their demand for more signs totally insincere; and "evil" because they are so arrogant as to dictate the conditions under which they will consent to believe. And they are "adulterous" because they place a greater premium on extra-biblical revelation, signs, and wonders than on God's own word, and they believe these provide greater validation than God's own character. This is a high-handed insult to the character and nature of God after He has already done and shown so much, to demand that He provide further validation of the truth and reliability of His word, or that His word is so defective and unreliable that it must be augmented by the illusory inventions of someone's own unbelieving mind or extra-biblical experiences. This attitude reveals a woefully deficient reverence for God and His word.

Psalm 33 concludes with a prayer, it is a prayer of submission and trust in the will of God, *"Let Thy lovingkindness, O LORD, be upon us, according as we have hoped in Thee"* (Ps 33:22). A few observations are in order. First, the word "hoped" is the same Hebrew word *yachal* as in verse 18, it is the hope that patiently waits. Secondly, the word "according" is a relative pronoun indicating a relationship between God's lovingkindness and our patient waiting. Psalm 103:17 expresses this relationship, *"But the lovingkindness of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear (i.e. reverence, awe, respect, honor) Him."* The psalmist is expressing what we might call the perseverance of the saints. It was this perseverance which the author of Hebrews tells his audience they are in need of (Hb 10:36). God's faithfulness is not conditioned on our endurance, but rather our patient waiting is an expression of faith, trust, reverence, awe, honor, and worship. Waiting demonstrates that we have confidence God will keep His promises, a reverent confidence that is grounded in the nature and character of God.

True worshipers worship God in Spirit and in truth, that is, their worship is God-centered, empowered by the Holy Spirit and in full conformity with and appropriate to the nature and character of God. Irreverent worship is never a product of the Holy Spirit. All true worship inspires a holy reverence, and it is the worship God demands, *"Worship the LORD with reverence, and rejoice with trembling"* (Ps 2:11). Anything less is not true worship - *Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, on those who hope for His lovingkindness, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our help and our shield. For our heart rejoices in Him, because we trust in His holy name. Let Thy lovingkindness, O LORD, be upon us, according as we have hoped in Thee – Ps 33:18-22.*