

*Claude Rochon, April 10, 2016*

## **So that my soul may praise you**

Today, I would like to bring a meditation based on Psalm 30.

This psalm was sung at the time of the dedication of the Second Temple, generally known as *Hanukah* (or Feast of lights) – a joyful festival that commemorates the purification of the Temple in the second century BC, three years after its profanation by the Greeks (1 Mac 4.36-59). As far as I know, it is still sung today in synagogues at the time of *Hanukah*.

However, when you read the psalm itself, a paradox emerges. Even though, the superscription of the psalm (verse 0, if you will) reads as “*A Song at the dedication of the temple*”, it deals mainly with the illness and recovery of an individual. Scholars generally believe what was initially an individual psalm became used as a collective psalm for dedication of the temple.

But whether it is an individual or collective psalm, it is a psalm of thanksgiving or praise. In fact, those two attitudes of the faithful meet. The psalmist is grateful because the Lord rescued him from the disease that threatened his very life. But if deliverance initially prompts thanksgiving, it often also brings forth praise from the lips of the believer (v. 1, 4, 9, and 12). The first and last verses of this text express praise to the Lord. Between these two verses, we find all the variations of Christian life, with its ups and downs.

### **Psalm 30**

<sup>1</sup> *I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up,  
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.*

David complains that his enemies (may) rejoice over him (or mock him). Has this ever happened to you? What hardships do we endure in our Christian witness? For example, as member of a peace church, I believe in non-violence and pacifism... which can be a real challenge when people bring up the subject of ISIS and how to deal with it. So I can identify with David.

<sup>2</sup> *O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,  
and you have healed me.*

<sup>3</sup> *O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol [the grave]  
restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.*

Verse 3 can be seen as an allegory for the Resurrection.

David's life was often threatened; not only by illness, but by his enemies. We may not be very often in such life-threatening situations, but there are days where we fully realize our weakness and the impossibility to reach whatever ideal we have set for ourselves. Then come along feelings of failure, guilt, and discouragement. But as with David, the Lord can heal us and “restore us to life”, so to speak.

<sup>4</sup> *Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones,  
and give thanks to his holy name.*

<sup>5</sup> *For his anger is but for a moment;  
his favour is for a lifetime.*

*Weeping may linger for the night,  
but joy comes with the morning.*

Some early scholars believed this was a reference to the Resurrection on a Sunday morning: weeping on Holy Friday and Saturday, and rejoicing on Easter morning.

<sup>6</sup> *As for me, I said in my prosperity,  
'I shall never be moved.'*

When things go well in our life, we tend to become presumptuous. We rely (and even take pride) in our own skills and capabilities. And this is not bad *per se*, because after all, it is God who gave us these skills:

<sup>7a</sup> *By your favour, O LORD,  
you had established me as a strong mountain;*

But there are times in life when this is not enough – maybe in our Christian walk, maybe in our ministry, maybe in our relationships in or outside the Church:

<sup>7b</sup> *you hid your face;  
I was dismayed.*

“Dismayed” is a strong word in Hebrew, implying shattering terror.

So, “I shall never be moved”, but then, “I was dismayed”. This is a good illustration of the vagaries of life, all the ups and downs which force us to confront our human reality: weak, unstable, inconsistent. It compels us to recognize our fears, our weaknesses, and our failures.

However, there is something that is straight, linear, and even untouchable in our lives. And it is to this Power that David reaches out in his time of need. And it is to this same Power to whom we can reach in our time of need:

<sup>8</sup> *To you, O LORD, I cried,  
and to the LORD I made supplication:  
<sup>9a</sup> 'What profit is there in my death,  
if I go down to the Pit?  
<sup>9b</sup> Will the dust praise you?  
Will it tell of your faithfulness?  
<sup>10</sup> Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me!  
O LORD, be my helper!'*

This is pretty shrewd on David's part. But is the Lord taken in by this argument? After all, there are tens of thousands of others who could praise God. But, at least, we know that he grants him his wish not to die:

<sup>11</sup> *You have turned my mourning into dancing [one of the signs of rejoicing in the Bible]  
you have taken off my sackcloth [a symbol of mourning]  
and clothed me with joy,*

I like that image: God puts on me a garment of joy!

<sup>12</sup> *so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.  
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you for ever.*

The Lord is LOVE. I know that I can return to Him time and time again with any problem I have in my life... or with myself. It is Him who will deliver me from my fears, who will strengthen me when I stagger, who will raise me when I fall, who will fill me with compassion for those who make me suffer: “*O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me*” (v. 2)

Thus, my life is made of “weeping in the night”, but also of “joy in the morning”. What is straight and solid in my life is God Himself, of course – but also the expression, in truth, in front of God, of who I am. To come before Him and show myself to Him just as I am: weeping and joy and all.

### **A Complex Movement**

In this psalm, I detect several movements. But they don't seem linear or even go in the same direction. So I turned to the biblical scholars for an idea of the psalm's structure. Unfortunately, it seems to be a very

complex structure and the scholars seem to all disagree on the exact structure. So I'll mention these different movements without trying to impose any kind of linearity on them.

### ***From Deliverance to Thanksgiving***

This is pretty much a no-brainer. However, in the modern world, we may not attribute our deliverance to God. Or just maybe say "Thank God" without really thinking about God. Whether or not it's God who specifically intervenes to deliver me, I just choose to be grateful. But whether we acknowledge God or not in our deliverance, deliverance often leads to joy.

### ***From Deliverance to Joy***

We can see this in the psalm: "*You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with [...] joy*" (v. 11). So deliverance also leads to joy. Furthermore, as a scholar puts it: "The psalmist has experienced rescue and must *share* the joy in what may have been a ritual of thanksgiving in the temple"<sup>1</sup> (which might explain how an individual psalm of thanksgiving became a collective one).

### ***From Joy to Praise***

The psalmist "must share the joy": so we move from joy to praise. Or as the psalmist puts it: "*You have [...] clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.*" (v. 11-12). There are two ways to look at this: (1) God gives me joy so I can praise him. Or, (2) because I have joy, that joy must be expressed in praise. I *must* share that joy. As another scholar puts it, "God's act of deliverance is so wonderful that its ripples stream out from the suppliant to other people and also spreads out through time. Indeed, the suppliant sees this as one of YHWH's aims into the act of deliverance."<sup>2</sup> Or, as the psalmist expresses it: "*So that my soul may praise you.*"

### **Why Does God Want Us to Praise Him?**

In his book, *Reflections on the Psalms*, C.S. Lewis asks a good question: why does God want us to praise Him? Of course, we may *want* to praise Him (for the reasons I have outlined, like deliverance, but for other ones as well). But it is true that some scriptures (especially in the Psalms) seem to command us to praise Him. Some nonbelievers even rail that the Christian God is some kind of self-centered, narcissistic egomaniac. David's plea to spare his life so that he can carry on praising God (v. 10) could even be interpreted this way.

Lewis gives a couple of answers. First, it is in the process of praise and worship that God communicates His Presence to us. So it benefits us more than it benefits God. Also, even in the material world, delight – or joy – often leads to praise: if I enjoy a nice meal, a good bottle of wine, a beautiful piece of music, my spouse or my children, I will tend to praise that object or person. I have to tell others about it. And this "praise" completes my pleasure: "We delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation."<sup>3</sup> It's as if... if I cannot tell others about it, my joy cannot be complete.

### ***From Praise to Joy***

And so it brings us back to joy again. As Lewis writes: "The Scotch catechism says that man's chief end is "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." But we shall then know that these are the same thing. Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him."<sup>4</sup>

So trial (of whatever type: physical, emotional, spiritual, individual, collective) leads to deliverance. Because God is faithful. And deliverance leads to joy, which leads to praise, which leads back to joy again, in a never-ending cycle... until the next trial and need for deliverance. Because such is life: "*You had established me as a strong mountain; [but] You hid your face [and] I was dismayed.*"

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Waltner, *Psalms*, Scottdale (PA), Herald Press, 2006, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms*, Grand Rapids (MI), Baker Academic, 2006, p. 432.

<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, Orlando (FL), Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1964, p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, p. 96-97.

But we enter that trial with a fresh supply of joy and a renewed sense of God's presence – so that our soul may praise Him... even in the midst of a trial.