

IN THE
PRESENCE
OF MY
ENEMIES

Psalms 25-37

Dale Ralph Davis



Psalm 29

A Psalm of David

- (1) Give to Yahweh, O sons of God,
give to Yahweh, glory and strength.
- (2) Give to Yahweh the glory his name deserves,
give homage to Yahweh in the splendor of (his) holiness.
- (3) Yahweh's voice over the waters!
The God of glory thunders;
Yahweh over many waters!
- (4) Yahweh's voice in power!
Yahweh's voice in majesty!
- (5) Yahweh's voice breaks cedars;
yes, Yahweh has shattered the cedars of Lebanon.
- (6) And he has made them skip around like a calf,
Lebanon and Sirion like the young of a wild ox.
- (7) Yahweh's voice is hewing up flames of fire!
- (8) Yahweh's voice makes the wilderness writhe,
Yahweh makes the wilderness of Kadesh writhe!

- (9) Yahweh's voice makes deer go into birth pangs,
and he stripped the forests bare
– and all in his temple say, 'Glory!'
- (10) **Yahweh** sat (enthroned) at the flood,
and Yahweh has seated (himself) as king forever.
- (11) **Yahweh** will give strength to his people;
Yahweh will bless his people with peace.

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God of the Storm

Some friends were on holiday in Scotland. They were rummaging in second-hand bookshops and brought me back a copy of *The Covenanters in Moray and Ross* by the Rev. M. MacDonald. In that volume MacDonald passes on the story of how that scoundrel Charles II arrived in Scotland in 1650. The ship that came to the mouth of the Spey had to drop anchor away out, and a boat was used to carry passengers to shore. But there was no pier and the transfer boat could not get near enough to allow the king to disembark dry-shod. What to do? Thomas Milne, the short but robust ferryman that day, offered his back to his Majesty and told him to 'loup on'. And so the king was lugged, Milne-like, to terra firma. I would guess Charles was hoping for something with more flourish for the royal advent than a piggy-back ride to shore. Doubtless disappointing.

That is likely the way many look upon Psalm 29. Not what we were hoping for; truth be told, a bit disappointing. And why so? Oh, maybe we were hoping for more of a pain-reliever, or reading of some distressing experience of the psalmist that we could enter into. But here in Psalm 29 there seems nothing but God – and God wreaking havoc and scaring His world to death. The psalm is not about us but God – and that, sadly, tends to cool our interest. It’s something like being a king and yet riding Thomas Milne to shore.

Yet Yahweh does, we might say, insist on imposing Himself on us in Psalm 29. There are eighteen uses of ‘Yahweh’ in these eleven verses. ‘Yahweh’s voice’ occurs seven times. The psalm moves from the worship of Yahweh (vv. 1-2) to the revelation of Yahweh (vv. 3-9) and ends with the people of Yahweh (vv. 10-11). Or we might say it goes from exhortation to revelation and on to consolation.

We could summarize verses 1-2 as **giving orders for Yahweh’s worship in heaven**. Notice several matters in the text. David calls the ‘sons of God’ to worship (v. 1). The phrase refers to angels or heavenly beings. The very same Hebrew phrase occurs in Psalm 89:6, of heavenly beings who can in no way compare to Yahweh. In the adjacent verses these ‘sons of God’ or ‘heavenly beings’ (ESV) form the ‘assembly of the holy ones’ or the ‘council of the holy ones’ – those who, as it were, are surrounding God’s throne (Ps. 89:5, 7). Here in Psalm 29 these ‘sons of God’ are told in a three-fold ascending crescendo to ‘Give to Yahweh!’ They are to give to Him ‘glory and strength’ and ‘the glory his name deserves’. What does that mean? It does not mean, obviously, that they can add anything to

Yahweh's majesty. It means at least to declare that glory and strength are Yahweh's and to acknowledge that they rightly belong to Him. Kidner observes that to 'give' glory and strength 'enlists the mind' (focus on the content of worship) while 'give homage' (or, 'bow down') 'enlists the will' (the matter of submission).¹ Which indicates that worship should be both thoughtful and submissive.

But now a realization should come creeping over us: if we are ordering angels to worship Yahweh with gusto, then we are not the only worshipers. This is the testimony of Psalm 103:20-21 as well:

Bless Yahweh, (you) his angels,
 (you) mighty ones who do his word....
 Bless Yahweh, all his hosts,
 his servants who do his will.

David is speaking to the angels and celestial beings, calling them to 'bless Yahweh,' which he himself is ready to do: 'Bless Yahweh, O my soul' (v. 22). When we order angels to worship God, we can be pretty sure, I think, that they will do it.

Talking to angels may not appeal to you, but there are some of us who do so regularly. Some of us sing the 'Doxology' nearly every week in public worship. It begins:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
 praise him all creatures here below...

We do not yet see this. We call on all creatures world-wide to praise our God, but this is not occurring at the

1 Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (London: Inter-Varsity, 1973), 125.

moment. This will be a ‘last thing’ affair (cf. Phil. 2:10-11) – it will be but it is ‘not yet’. But then the Doxology moves on:

praise him above, ye heavenly hosts....

There it is – we are caught talking to angels right in church! That, I’m pretty sure, takes place right away, as soon as we ask them to add their deafening adoration to our often meagre efforts. Then the searchlight comes round to us: if we are ordering angels to praise, are we ourselves gripped with the urgency, necessity, and delightfulness of Yahweh’s praise?

One of the arenas in which we can see Yahweh’s ‘glory’, the evidence of His goodness, is in the storm. So in verses 3-9 David moves on to say we should be **taking in Yahweh’s display on earth**. Here the psalm relates the video and audio of a massive thunderstorm (v. 3) apparently moving off the Mediterranean, working its way eastward and to the north of Israel. The storm breaks cedars: ‘Yahweh shattered the cedars of Lebanon.’ That’s quite impressive, considering those cedars grew to a height of 70-80 feet and that their trunks could sometimes be 30-40 feet in circumference.² Even mountains are fragile before Yahweh’s storm. When Lebanon and Sirion [=Hermon] are skipping around ‘like the young of a wild ox’, is it because of the fury of the storm or has an

2 J. I. Packer, M. C. Tenney, and William White, eds., *The Bible Almanac* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 255-56.

earthquake been thrown into the mix?³ Then come the slashes and bolts of lightning, the ‘flames of fire’ (v. 7) that Yahweh hews out. The storm moves on and convulses wilderness areas (v. 8),⁴ thunderous outbursts scaring the female deer into labor and leaving forests in tatters (v. 9). A conservationist’s worst nightmare.

This is quite a collage. It’s as if David says, Look at what mighty items His voice destroys (v. 5), what massive items He moves (v. 6), what isolated areas He shakes (v. 8), and what a range of creation He affects from the timid doe (v. 9a) to whole forests (v. 9b). And all those ‘sons of God’ in the heavenly temple explode with ‘Glory!’ (v. 9c).

We should pause to say that sometimes you may hear the claim that Psalm 29 is really an old Canaanite hymn praising Baal, the storm god, the god of the lightning bolt, and so on, and that biblical writers may have taken it over or adapted it to praise Yahweh. I doubt it. Biblical writers had sufficient theological sophistication that they had no need for Canaanite ghost-writers to express their theology for them. But I don’t doubt that Psalm 29 may have Baal theology in view. Not to endorse or imitate but to oppose. Psalm 29 may partly function as ‘put-down’ theology, as if to say to the pagan media: ‘Nuts! Baal is no storm god. Yahweh is God of the storm. Here’s a clip

3 As Allen Ross suggests (*A Commentary on the Psalms: Volume 1 (1-41)*, Kregel Exegetical Library [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011], 659).

4 There is debate about the Kadesh of v. 8b. Some suppose it may refer to Kadesh-barnea of the southern border of Israel, but it could well be the Kadesh about 75 miles north of Damascus on the Orontes River – and so still in the north.

of Him at work. And He brings his storm right across Phoenicia, supposedly Baal's backyard!

Some people probably wince at the idea of biblical faith using put-downs – it seems rather nasty. But put-downs (well, we can clean them up and call them polemics) are sometimes necessary and very effective. In 1910 President Taft appointed former President Theodore Roosevelt to represent the United States at the funeral of Edward VII. After the funeral the German Kaiser told TR to call on him 'at two o'clock; I have just 45 minutes to give you.' Roosevelt shot back, 'I will be there at two, your Majesty, but, unfortunately, I have but 20 minutes to give you.'⁵ That was a put-down and probably an effective one in the face of Teutonic arrogance. So don't lose sleep over the way the Bible may slam Baal worship.

But why does David paint this scenario of 'Yahweh's voice'? Because he wants me to be impressed with Yahweh's glory and majesty. And where might you and I see that 'glory'? We are predisposed to look for it in the full-color placid Vermont farmstead covered in ten inches of pristine snow that appears on the cover of our January devotional booklet. But Psalm 29 implies you might do better watching a Weather Channel re-run of the Six Worst Storms of the Decade. We *say* we agree with this in our hymns but perhaps without much conviction. We have all too little memory of singing:

5 Paul F. Boller, Jr., *Presidential Anecdotes* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 210.

His chariots of wrath the deep thunderclouds form,
and dark is his path on the wings of the storm.⁶

Or:

... and clouds arise and tempests blow
by order from your throne.⁷

Maybe sometimes we're not looking in the right places. When we see Yahweh's storm pounding and pummeling His world, perhaps our first response should be 'Glory!'

Finally, at the end of the psalm, David wants us to be **resting in Yahweh's adequacy for His people** (vv. 10-11). In these two verses David gives us a double revelation of Yahweh, as both reigning King (v. 10) and sustaining God (v. 11).

In verse 10 we meet something of the dual nature of Yahweh's kingship. The first line mentions the flood, *mabbûl*, the word always used of what we call Noah's flood (Gen. 6–8). Since the reference is to a previous historical event, I think the 'perfect' Hebrew verb should be translated as a past tense. Hence: 'Yahweh sat (enthroned) at the flood.' The next line uses the same verb but a different form to point to Yahweh's continuing kingship: 'And Yahweh has seated (himself) as king forever.' So there's a double claim: there is a premier moment of Yahweh's kingship – at the flood, and there is the ongoing exercise of His kingship – forever. (The

6 'O Worship the King,' stanza 2.

7 'I Sing the Mighty Power of God,' stanza 3.

earlier episode was not a flash in the pan – His sovereignty continues.)

Why does this matter? Well, we might have a little more put-down theology operating here. In pagan materials like *The Gilgamesh Epic* the gods go berserk over the flood. They ‘were terror-stricken at the deluge’, ‘cowered like dogs and crouched in distress,’ and ‘Ishtar cried out like a woman in travail’.⁸ The gods brought the flood and then were terrified and scared spitless at what they had let loose. But in the Bible we don’t have a bunch of divine nervous breakdowns: ‘Yahweh [emphatic] sat enthroned at the flood.’ He was there. He was in control. He sat as King at the flood, at that supreme chaotic event in the past (v. 10a) and He remains as King forever (v. 10b) – on through whatever His people may face in post-flood time. And that includes times as depicted in verses 3-9 when all seems like chaos in excelsis. Even in that Yahweh reigns.

Now David adds that additional touch: Yahweh is not only reigning King (v. 10) but sustaining God (v. 11):

Yahweh will give strength to his people;
Yahweh will bless his people with peace.⁹

We are right back, then, to Psalm 28 (see 28:8)! And, after all the fireworks of verses 3-9, it is fascinating that the last word of the psalm is ‘peace’. But we mustn’t miss the double emphasis: reigning King, sustaining God. For

8 See Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: Phoenix, 1963), 85, 249.

9 ESV translates verse 11 as a wish or prayer. I think that is wrong. The subject in both lines (‘Yahweh’) is emphatic, which seems to go better with a statement than a wish.

though Yahweh is King (v. 10), it's as if He gets down off His throne to put fresh heart into His people.

David McCullough tells about Harry Truman running in a primary election for an eventual US Senate seat. It was 1934 and Missouri was in dire need of rain. On a blistering summer day, near Mexico, Missouri, Truman saw a farmer in a field having trouble with his binder. He stops the car, climbs over the fence, gives a brief introduction, takes off his coat and, as the local paper told it, proceeds 'to set up the binder under a hot sun for his new found friend'.¹⁰ Of course Truman got some political capital out of that but still the deed showed a man who was willing to come into the everyday dilemmas of his fellow citizens. That seems to be the assurance of verse 11 in the context of this psalm. The God whose voice shatters cedars also 'climbs over the fence' to sustain and stabilize His people.

One can hardly study Psalm 29 without conjuring up the episode in Mark 4:35-41. Jesus, asleep in the boat, the storm that even terrified the fishermen among the disciples.... Fully awakened, Jesus rebukes the wind and stifles the sea. Here in the psalm Yahweh brings the storm, in Mark 4 Yahweh calms the storm (cf. v. 41, 'Who then is this?'). Either way He is Lord of the storm. And, anyway, we know that as long as Jesus is in the boat nothing too bad can happen!

10 David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 209-10.