



Psalm 111 - Praise for God's Wonderful Works

Introduction

This is a hymn of praise, celebrating the great works that the Lord has done for his people in calling them to be his, in caring for them, and in protecting them. These great works express God's unstinting goodness toward his people. The purpose of singing the psalm is to remind the people of these deeds and to encourage them to embrace the privileges that God's call has bestowed, by a heartfelt <<*fear of the Lord*>>. Psalm 111 focuses on the deeds God has done for his people as a body. The covenant established Israel as God's people, and his works sustain and protect Israel as a whole. The redemption described here is for the sake of calling and protecting the whole people and for fostering the conditions under which true piety may thrive.

Psalms 111-112 go together. Both follow an acrostic pattern: after the initial 'Praise the Lord', the first word of each line begins with the successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. For both psalms, the flow of thought is governed by the acrostic structure. Verse 10 brings its praise to a close with a reference to the fear of the Lord – a wisdom idea, coupled with understanding – while Psalm 112:1 leads off its wisdom meditation with <<*Happy are those who fear the Lord*>>. This clear connection helps readers in interpretation: in Psalm 111 it is the Lord whose righteousness endures forever and who is gracious and merciful, thus echoing Exodus 34:6, while in Psalm 112 it is the godly person whose righteousness endures forever and who is gracious and merciful. The implication is that the person who fears the Lord and attends to his commandments has God's own moral traits reflected in his character. This is the goal of redemption, to renew the image of God in human beings.

Psalm 111, in stressing God's mighty deeds of redemption for his people, focuses on the big story for the whole people; Psalm 112, in stressing wisdom, encourages each member of God's people in a day-to-day walk, a little story, that contributes to the big story of the whole people. Christians sing these psalms in the same way,

with the mighty deeds including Jesus' resurrection and installation as the heir of David, and God's continuing care for his people.

¹ Praise the Lord!

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

Psalm 111:1

Praise the Lord. Psalm 111 begins with the simple declaration, *hallelujah!* It was as if the psalmist thought, "before I describe how I will praise him, let me simply declare his praise." The declaration also has the sense of encouraging others to do the same – "I will praise the Lord, you should also."

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart. Each member of the congregation participates in the task of giving thanks and praise. After the declaration came the proclamation. There would be nothing held back in his praise, it would be given to God with his whole heart, as did David: *<<I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds>>* (Psalm 9:1). Charles Spurgeon commented, "God cannot be acceptably praised with a divided heart, neither should we attempt so to dishonour him; for our whole heart is little enough for his glory, and there can be no reason why it should not all be lifted up in his praise."

In the company of the upright. The praise would be whole-hearted, but it would also be public. Praising God with others showed that he gloried in the praises of God, and was also a help and encouragement to his praise. The word for company or assembly and the word for congregation speak of different size groups. Company refers to a smaller, private group – something like a modern small group, and congregation to the larger gatherings of God's true people: *<<Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous>>* (Psalm 1:5).

² Great are the works of the Lord,
studied by all who delight in them.

Psalm 111:2

Great are the works of the Lord. These are God's deeds in creation, for example: *<<When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established>>* (Psalm 8:3), and: *<<O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures>>* (Psalm 104:24), and especially in redeeming his people: *<<He said: I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform marvels, such*

as have not been performed in all the earth or in any nation; and all the people among whom you live shall see the work of the Lord; for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you>> (Exodus 34:10), <<O Lord God, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your might; what god in heaven or on earth can perform deeds and mighty acts like yours!>> (Deuteronomy 3:24), <<for it is your own eyes that have seen every great deed that the Lord did>> (Deuteronomy 11:7), <<The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made>> (Psalm 145:9), and: <<So the Lord kept watch over this calamity until he brought it upon us. Indeed, the Lord our God is right in all that he has done; for we have disobeyed his voice>> (Daniel 9:14). God should be praised for who he is, but what he has done is also worthy of praise. Here the emphasis is on his work in creation, and these works are great in their number and in their significance. Spurgeon stated, “In design, in size, in number, in excellence, all the works of the Lord are great. Even the little things of God are great.”

Studied by all who delight in them. The people carefully ponder on what God has done for them as individuals and as a collective nation. The greatness of God’s work invites close study. This invites the scientist, the historian, and the theologian to do their work with all their strength and to take pleasure in how God’s wisdom and power are revealed through his honourable and glorious works.

³ Full of honour and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures for ever.

Psalm 111:3

Full of honour and majesty is his work. God’s greatness and power give him a regal, royal bearing. He is marked by strength and beauty. Honour and majesty describe royal magnificence: <<His glory is great through your help; splendour and majesty you bestow on him>> (Psalm 21:5), and: <<Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one, in your glory and majesty>> (Psalm 45:3), which is suited to the theme of divine kingship: <<Deck yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendour>> (Job 40:10), <<Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honour and majesty>> (Psalm 104:1), and: <<Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable>> (Psalm 145:3). These, along with strength and beauty, are attributes of God, into whose presence people come in his sanctuary.

His righteousness endures for ever. God shows his righteousness, his uprightness and faithfulness to his promises, in his great deeds: <<Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and your law is the truth>> (Psalm 119:142), and: <<For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them

like wool; but my deliverance will be for ever, and my salvation to all generations>> (Isaiah 51:8). Refer also to the comment made on Psalm 112:3.

- ⁴ He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the Lord is gracious and merciful.

Psalm 111:4

He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds. God designed his saving acts to be remembered among his people. It is a dishonour to him and a weakness of man that the miracles of his redemption are forgotten, or worse yet denied. Not only are God works in creation great, but so is his work of guiding and arranging all things, his work of providence. Refer also to the comment made on Psalm 112:6-8.

The Lord is gracious and merciful is taken from God's own declaration to Moses in Exodus 34:6. First in the mind of the psalmist was God's great work of grace and love. He is full of these qualities in his being, and expresses them in his great works. Refer also to the comment made on Psalm 112:4.

- ⁵ He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

Psalm 111:5

He provides food for those who fear him. Perhaps the psalmist had in mind God's provision for Israel through the wilderness, or the more general principle that he had never seen the descendants of the righteous begging bread: <<*I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread*>> (Psalm 37:25). Refer also to the comment made on Psalm 112:1.

He is ever mindful of his covenant. God will never forget the covenant he made with Abraham and his descendants in Genesis Chapter 12, nor the covenant he made with Israel at Mount Sinai; refer to Exodus Chapter 24. Just as God remembers, so should his people remember (v.4). Refer also to the comments made on Psalm 25:6-7 and 105:8.

- ⁶ He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.

Psalm 111:6

He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. God did not hide his greatness, but has declared it to his people – if

they will pay attention! This declaration of his great works brought Israel into the land of Canaan, i.e. it describes the taking of the Promised Land.

⁷ The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.

⁸ They are established for ever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

Psalm 111:7-8

God's precepts or the instructions given to his people express his love and faithfulness as much as do the works of his hands in redemptive history: <<*the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes*>> (Psalm 19:8), and: <<*You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently*>> (Psalm 119:4). Thus the precepts are established for ever, in order for God's people to perform them with faithfulness and uprightness.

The works of his hands are faithful and just. What God does is true and fair, and what he commands is settled, i.e. his precepts are trustworthy. This is seen in God's great works in creation and in history: <<*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever*>> (Hebrews 13:8). Spurgeon observed, "He is no fickle despot, commanding one thing one day and another, but his commands remain absolutely unaltered, their necessity equally unquestionable, their excellence permanently proven, and their reward eternally secure."

⁹ He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant for ever.
Holy and awesome is his name.

Psalm 111:9

He sent redemption to his people. One of God's greatest works is rescuing his people from their oppression and sin, and doing it in the context of his everlasting covenant. The psalmist likely had the exodus in mind but there are countless other examples that could be applied, especially in the Christian era: <<*But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*>> (Romans 3:21-24), and: <<*He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that,*

as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'>> (1 Corinthians 1:30-31).

The KJV translates the phrase, holy and awesome is his name as 'holy and reverend is his name'. Spurgeon commented "How good men can endure to be called 'reverend' we know not. Being unable to discover any reason why our fellow-men should reverence us, we half suspect that in other men there is not very much which can entitle them to be called reverend, very reverend, right reverend, and so on. It may seem a trilling matter, but for that very reason we would urge that the foolish custom should be allowed to fall into disuse."

Adam Clarke comments on the word reverend from the King James Version: "The word reverend comes to us from the Latins, *reverendus*, and is compounded of *re*, intensive, and *vereor*, to be feared; and most or right reverend, *reverendissimus*, signifies to be greatly feared. These terms are now only titles of ecclesiastical respect, especially in the Protestant ministry; but there was a time in which these were no empty titles. Such was the power of the clergy, that, when they walked not in the fear of the Lord, they caused the people to fear, and they themselves were to be feared; but, when the secular power was added to the spiritual, they were then truly *reverendi* and *reverendissimi*, to be feared and greatly to be feared."

¹⁰ The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practise it have a good understanding.
His praise endures for ever.

Psalm 111:10

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. Taking into account the greatness of God's works, one should appropriately fear him. God should be regarded with respect, reverence, and awe. This proper attitude of the creature toward the creator is the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom cannot advance further until this starting point is established. The idea that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom is found elsewhere in the Scriptures: <<*And he said to humankind, "Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding"*>> (Job 28:28), <<*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction*>> (Proverbs 1:7), <<*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight*>> (Proverbs 9:10), and: <<*The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone*>> (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

This is the core maxim of the Book of Proverbs: the quest for wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. Knowledge and wisdom are closely tied together in

Proverbs: knowledge tends to focus on correct understanding of the world and oneself as creatures of the magnificent and loving God, while wisdom is the acquired skill of applying that knowledge rightly, or skill in the art of godly living. The reason that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of both knowledge and wisdom is that the moral life begins with reverence and humility before the maker and redeemer. The idea of a quest for knowledge sets biblical wisdom in the broad context of the ancient Near Eastern quest for truth, and Proverbs 1:7 also validates such a quest as legitimate and good. Thus it affirms a kind of creational revelation, the idea that one can find moral and theological truth through observing the world. At the same time, it distinguishes the biblical pursuit of knowledge and wisdom from those of the surrounding cultures, for it asserts that submission to the Lord is foundational to the attainment of real understanding. By using the covenant name the Lord in preference to the more generic God, this verse makes the point that truth is found through Israel's God. In addition, the verse asserts that fools despise wisdom and instruction, thus setting up the alternative between the two ways of wisdom and folly. This contrast dominates the entire Book of Proverbs, as the way of wisdom, righteousness, and the fear of the Lord is set against the way of folly, evil, and scoffing.

All those who practise it have a good understanding. Taking into account the greatness of God's works, one should obey God – that is, observe his commandments. A life of obedience reveals that one has a good understanding of the greatness of God's works. Spurgeon explained that, "Obedience to God proves that our judgement is sound." By mentioning this and good understanding, i.e. sound insight into God's moral order for the world, the psalm paves the way for Psalm 112, a wisdom psalm.

His praise endures for ever. Taking into account the greatness of God's works, one should praise him, and never stop praising him. The angels surrounding God's throne see his greatness and the greatness of his works, and they never stop praising him: <<*And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing, 'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come'*>> (Revelation 4:8). This is the eternal future for those who are called to be God's people but the psalmist is saying, "Sing his praises during this life rather waiting to do it in the life yet to come."