

Living Coram Deo

Psalm 29

Preached by Phillip Kayser at DCC on Sunday, June 16th 2024

I. Introduction - What does Coram Deo Mean?

A few years ago I engaged in a public debate with some Christians on the subject of evolution. Two of them had been vigorously insisting that you can't bring God and the Bible into science because science only deals with the physical world – that which can be observed and tested in a laboratory - as if God didn't make the physical world. But they said that by definition science rules out God being injected into scientific studies. He said that the bible deals with spiritual, invisible reality and science deals with the laws of physics. And yet he claimed to be a Christian.

Another person on that same forum said (and I am quoting him verbatim),

“Science tries to look at the natural world as completely natural, as a perfectly integrated system of laws in which the spiritual concepts of separation, sin and death simply have no meaning as such.”

And I responded by quoting Cornelius Van Til, who said:

“Since God created all things, by, for and through Christ (Col. 1:16) and since He sustains all things (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3), it would be”impossible to interpret any fact without a basic falsification unless it be regarded in its relation to God the Creator and to Christ the Redeemer.”¹

And then I said, “When God is left out of science it becomes a godless science.”

Well this is a passage that illustrates what Van Til was saying. For David, it was *impossible* to look at *any* aspect of creation without glorying in God's wisdom, power, judgments, mercies, etc. All of creation was *shouting* God's existence.

And when you begin to live every moment of your life before the face of God, it revolutionizes your Christian life. If you want a great essay on this subject, R. C. Sproul Sr. wrote a very short essay in 2017 titled, “What Does ‘Coram Deo’ Mean?” I won't give away the whole essay, but here is how he summarized it. He said,

“The big idea of the Christian life is coram Deo. Coram Deo captures the essence of the Christian life.”

¹ Van Til, Christian Theistic Evidence, p. iii

Before I keep reading, let me point out that this is not an overstatement. It is critical that Christians learn how to live before the face of God - the main theme of the mini-series that I began a few weeks ago. Anyway, back to Sproul. He said,

“The big idea of the Christian life is coram Deo. Coram Deo captures the essence of the Christian life.”

This phrase literally refers to something that takes place in the presence of, or before the face of, God. To live coram Deo is to live one’s entire life in the presence of God, under the authority of God, to the glory of God.²

And I say, “Amen!” He went on to say that any version of Christianity that compartmentalizes life so that part of life is sacred and the rest of life is secular has a fundamental inconsistency that will eventually destroy even the sacred part of that lifestyle. If you aren’t washing dishes as unto God, God will become less and less central to your life and even your worship will eventually be negatively impacted. Everything we do must be seen as under God and as consistent with His sovereignty over all. I’ll just quote one more paragraph from his essay. Sproul said,

This means that if a person fulfills his or her vocation as a steelmaker, attorney, or homemaker coram Deo, then that person is acting every bit as religiously as a soul-winning evangelist who fulfills his vocation. It means that David was as religious when he obeyed God’s call to be a shepherd as he was when he was anointed with the special grace of kingship. It means that Jesus was every bit as religious when He worked in His father’s carpenter shop as He was in the Garden of Gethsemane.

And I say, “Amen, Amen, and Amen!” And this is a Psalm that teaches us how to worship and serve God in absolutely everything that we do. There are just going to be three main points today:

- I. A Call to Worship (vv. 1-2)
- II. The Motivation for Worship (vv. 3-9)
- III. The Goal of Worship (vv. 10-11)

Let’s dig into the text.

II. A Call To Worship (vv. 1-2)

The call to worship is given in verses 1-2. These are very familiar verses.

² The essay can be read at <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/what-does-coram-deo-mean>

Give unto the LORD, O you mighty ones, give unto the LORD glory and strength.
Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name; Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.

What I want to point out is that the original context for this call to worship was not the corporate Sabbath gathering. Instead, we find that David was caught in a tremendous thunderstorm, which many commentators believe was accompanied by a tornado. And rather than freaking out, David was so awestruck by God's display of power in the storm that he felt compelled to call others to worship God. There wasn't anybody else around, so he called upon the angels to worship God in verse 1. The Hebrew for "O mighty ones," *בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים* (*bene elohim*) is one of the titles for angels.

And so this rainstorm was a call to worship. And the point is that worship should not be restricted to Sunday. David didn't have to wait till he got to the tabernacle or the synagogue. He found calls to worship everywhere he went. When I am driving down the road I am conversing with God about everything I am seeing, or am at least conscious of God's presence with me. Worship is basically glorifying God in all that we do and relating everything we do to God.

Unfortunately, the only call to worship that many Christians ever hear is the one that is given from the pulpit. And even there we sometimes do not respond as fully as we could. And I believe the reasons are the same. When I joined Faith Presbyterian Church in Canada around 47 years ago, our church met in a conference room in the Holiday Inn. And there were two old ladies who constantly complained that they couldn't worship properly because we weren't meeting in a church building. They thought that the atmosphere just wasn't conducive to worship.

And though I didn't say it out loud, my first thought was, "O wow! Pity the poor people in the book of Acts who met in homes, and in open fields. They never had a chance to 'worship properly!'" Pity the early Christians who met in the catacombs, or the persecuted church that often meets in caves. Most Christians in communist countries, Islamic countries and in African countries do not have what we think of as a church building. And as a result, they have what many of us Westerners would consider way too many distractions from worship.

My parents were missionaries in Ethiopia, and I remember sitting on the ground in worship services with all of us having our knees scrunched up, and wow! There were distractions everywhere! A chicken would run in, and then would be shooed away with a squawk. I would watch a bug crawling up the leg of someone a few feet away. A toddler would pull the tail of a dog and make it yelp. It was easy to get distracted if your heart was not in it. And so, in a sense it was a test of our *hearts*. What is it that causes *you* to worship or hinders *your* worship? I think if you can discover that, you will find the difference between living *coram deo* and being oblivious to God most of the day.

David had learned how to tune in to God wherever he was. Seeing this thunderstorm caused his heart to well up in worship. And David was prompted to worship by almost everything that he saw. In Psalm 104, seeing a birds nest made him want to worship because he delighted in God's wisdom. Seeing the wonder of cows giving birth, the ocean

beating against the shore, the wild goats up on the mountains, and the coney in their rock caves, the sun and the moon, the lions hunting prey. David saw all of those as calls to worship God, not just on Sunday, but wherever he was. Now in verses 1-2 David realizes that we have a tendency to ignore such calls to worship.

The New King James has “give to the Lord glory and strength.” The marginal rendering is actually better, and it agrees with the NASB and NIV. It says, “Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.” We can’t *give* any glory or strength to the Lord that He does not already have, but we can certainly *ascribe* to God that glory and power; we can *recognize and acknowledge* the glory and power of the thunderstorm he is about to describe is being *God’s* glory and power. And over and over the Israelites forgot that. They ascribed the power to Baal like the Canaanites did. And David is saying, “Baal is not the Lord of the storm, God is.” Now we would never say that Baal was the Lord of the storm, would we? Well... I wouldn’t be too sure. What were those Christian scientists doing when they were excluding God from nature and from science? Something other than God had become their highest reality Monday through Friday. If God is not upholding scientific law, then what is?

Did you realize that Jacob kept idols for years? When many Old Testament saints kept idols, they didn’t do it because they wanted to abandon God. They saw these images as having some kind of intrinsic power sort of like a lucky rabbit’s foot, or some of the icons and images that the Roman Catholics and some Protestants have. And I have known Christians who superstitiously believe that they will not catch fish unless they wear their lucky fishing cap, or who get excited about a four-leaf clover. That is failing to ascribe to the Lord the glory due unto His name. Others who are not superstitious, are overly mechanistic and don’t see God’s hand in AIDS, or in storms, in typhoons, or in gentle rains.

I didn’t ask the Christian brothers in that science forum about AIDS and typhoons, but I suspect that they would say that God’s hand is *not* in those things. They would probably speak of it as being a fluke, or lucking out if their car escapes the hail damage. We act like Deists and see God as having set laws of nature in motion, but only once in a while interfering with those laws. There is no personalism in nature. What a sad thing it is to be a scientist and miss the glory of God. It never ceases to amaze me at how close to the truth and yet how far away from the truth Carl Sagan was when he spoke of the wisdom and planning of evolution as if evolution was a person. But are we much different when we view the flight of a cardinal to our bird feeder, or find a branch that has damaged our roof after a storm?

Many of the things that David praises God for in nature cause us to have awe, amazement and fascination as well, but do they draw our hearts out to God? Do they cause us to worship? Or are we merely fascinated with the intricacies of nature? If we can develop an attitude of worship in our day by day lives that can make the Hymn, *How Great Thou Art*, a personal testimony, then having that continual attitude of worship, we will be a long way to developing a heart that is focused intently on corporate worship here on the Sabbath. We are not going to complain about the externals so much, but will be drawn to worship because we sense the presence of God in our midst.

III. The Motivation To Worship - God Is Present (vv. 3-9)

And this leads us to the second main point: the *motivation* for worship is *the fact that God is present*. Notice that God is mentioned in every verse in this psalm. David does not want us to miss the fact that *God* thunders through the storm; *God* tears apart the oak trees; *God* makes the ground rumble as the tornado comes roaring through like a freight train and *God* leaves a path of destruction through the forest. I wish you could read the poem in Hebrew for yourself, because David makes it sound like a thunderstorm just by the words he uses. My professor in seminary was an expert in Hebrew, and he read this psalm to us one time, and it sent chills up my spine to hear the onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeia is the formation of words like buzz, gurgle, or hiss that sounds sort of like what the word represents. And the onomatopoeia in this Psalm is beautiful. I can't replicate that for you, but let me just give you a few examples:

The repeated phrase “the voice of the Lord” sounds like thunder off in the distance: *kohl Yahweh, kohl Yahweh, kohl Yahweh* (יְהוָה קוֹל יְהוָה קוֹל יְהוָה קוֹל). But when it is put in conjunction with other words it gives the feel of the storm coming in, moving overhead and dissipating into the east. In verse 3 the storm is brewing out over the Mediterranean, and in the language you can hear a small soft rumble of thunder and a little bit of reverb in the Hebrew. In verse 4 as the storm moves inland there is a much sharper sound of thunder through onomatopoeia: The first phrase shows the crash *בַּכֹּחַ קוֹל־יְהוָה* (Kohl Yahweh bacoach) and then the next phrase the reverb *קוֹל יְהוָה יִהְיֶה בְּהַדָּר* (kohl yahweh bahador – just a little bit softer). But in verse 5 you have the most awesome language, and the words that are chosen for the cedars breaking are onomatopoeic: *וַיִּשְׁבַּר אֲרָזִים שִׁבְרָה* (shover aratzim wayeshabar). It's almost like a ripping sound. Now my Hebrew teacher could do a much better job of showing that all the way through the Psalm. And when he taught me Hebrew, he used this Psalm along with a few other passages to show Hebrew onomatopoeia. I still remember him reading the Hebrew. But as we go on into verses 6 through 9 you can hear the storm pass over head from the first mountain range of Lebanon, to the next mountain range where Sirion or Mount Hermon is located, and then dissipating into the steppes of Kadesh in the east.

And the reason David uses these words is not only to give the *feel* for the storm, but also to make it unmistakably clear that God controlled every branch that fell, and every wind that blew. We who are in an age of science tend to be very skeptical about ascribing too much meaning to rain, sun, falling leaves, bugs, etc. saying that God brings it upon just and the unjust, and the implication is that since it seems indiscriminate, therefore it doesn't have meaning. We tend to view weather, pests, mildew and earthquakes like the Deists do. We think: “Yes, God controls the weather, but not in a personal way. He just sets laws of physics in motion so that Southern California is always going to have different weather patterns than Nebraska will have irrespective of what people live there.” They don't see any cause and effect in this world.

And I will admit that it is true that God makes desert regions and luxuriant regions, but He doesn't just wind up a clock and let it run. History shows covenantal judgments and blessings as the people as a whole believe or rebel. And in both cases the Bible is quite clear that *God is present in the storm. And God is present in the drought.* We do not just deal with

impersonal laws set in motion. In nature we are witnessing a personal God who is orchestrating every detail with a purpose and a goal in mind; guaranteeing that all things work together for our personal good. Praise God!

Let's read verses 3-9 with this in mind.

3 The voice of the LORD is over the waters; The God of glory thunders; The LORD is over many waters. 4 The voice of the LORD is powerful; The voice of the LORD is full of majesty. 5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars, Yes, the LORD splinters the cedars of Lebanon. 6 He makes them also skip like a calf, Lebanon and Sirion like a young wild ox. 7 The voice of the LORD divides the flames of fire. 8 The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; The LORD shakes the Wilderness of Kadesh. 9 The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth, And strips the forests bare; And in His temple everyone says, "Glory!"

At least the *angels* are awestruck with God's hand in nature, even if the scientists are not. It's not just during special times like the Exodus, or the conquest of Canaan, or Jonah in the storm, or other judgments that God controls the weather for special purposes. There is what Gary North used to call "a cosmic personalism" everywhere in this universe. I love that phrase that he coined - a cosmic personalism. In other words, God's personal relationship to us is seen throughout the cosmos. He is working all things together for our good (as Romans 8 words it). That's describing a cosmic personalism.

In Zechariah 2 God says that He controls the winds just as surely as He controls the nations. Revelation 7:1 says that God commands certain angels who control the winds to keep the wind from blowing for a specified period of time. And just as a side-note, we need to be more cognizant that there are angels who do God's bidding in this world. They are all around us according to the Scripture. And when angels see how pathetic our worship is, it troubles them. They are probably astounded at how pitiful Christian worship sometimes is.

But moving on: 1 Samuel 12:19-18 says that the destructive rain that came at harvest time (and ruined the harvest) came because Israel asked for a king. They may not have known that that was the reason for that rain if Samuel hadn't told them, or unless they had been sensitive to self-examination, but it was just as real. And they should have known that from the law. Deuteronomy 11 and Deuteronomy 28 both indicate that throughout Israel's entire history and even during the captivity, God would use the weather along with pests, mildew, and other natural occurrences as aspects of discipline and reward. When God told Job about His personal hand in all aspects of creation, Job repented of his blindness and was awestruck at God's goodness.

Can you see why there is the immediate response of praise from the angels in verse 9? It says, "And in His temple, everyone says, 'Glory!'" Angels live *coram deo*. They constantly live before the face of God. We have a hard time doing that. Everyone in God's heavenly temple cries glory because they see God's hand at work, and His wisdom and power and majesty. It takes God's personal presence in the storm to illicit such a response. There is no such thing as chance in God's world, and we do a dishonor to God when we look at the weather as if it is arbitrary. If a thunderstorm elicits a "Glory!" from the angels, it ought to elicit a "Glory, Hallelujah!" from God's people too. Or if we sense that it is a judgment, then

it ought to illicit a humbling of ourselves before Almighty God. This is one of the things that I appreciate about the Pilgrims and the Puritans. They were in tune with God's hand in nature. Some modern scientists would say they were superstitious in ascribing so much meaning to Providence. I would say, "No. They were men of *true* science and *true* learning because they saw God's hand in everything." The other kind of science is what the Bible speaks of as "science falsely so-called."

I own a book called *The Light and the Glory*, by Peter Marshall and David Manuel. I found it to be fun reading because it gives a theological interpretation to the early years of the founding of America, from God's sending of Columbus to the settling of the Puritans and the Pilgrims and later into America's history. And these authors show how none of those details was by accident. Now, I don't necessarily agree with all of their interpretations. But at least they were seeking to see God's hand in history.

But back to the Pilgrims. One of the things that really impressed me about them was the immediate response they had to drought and rain. They responded to those things as Providences brought by God. These pilgrims saw God's hand in everything from the Indians who saved their lives to the Indians who attacked them; from plagues and droughts, to unparalleled health and gentle rains. And when you see all these details brought together by Peter Marshall and David Manuel you come to love Providential History. It makes you worship.

Thanksgiving day was a heartfelt response of the people to God for His mercies to them, not as modern textbooks teach, a thanksgiving to the Indians - though I'm sure they were thankful to the Indians too. The Pilgrims and Puritans saw God as present and personal in all their affairs. And because they were able to respond to God's calls to worship in nature, I think it enabled them to respond to God's calls to worship from the pulpit in a much more gutsy and full-hearted way than we tend to. They saw God as powerfully present in their worship services and it caused them to fear, to love, to bow down. It had nothing to do with the atmosphere. If you think that your atmosphere is lacking, you should have sat in *their* services. Oh wow! Their services were three to four hours long, most of which was preaching. But the motive for worship for them was God's personal presence.

IV. The Goal Of Worship (vv. 10-11)

This psalm ends with a two-fold goal for worship - 1) give God glory 2) and receive blessing. The first part, and the most important part is *what* we give to God in worship: we enthrone Him on our praises and acknowledge Him as king or sovereign. Verse 9 says, "And in his temple everyone cries, 'Glory!'" That's what they see - God's glory. Verse 10 says, "The LORD sat enthroned at the Flood, and the LORD sits as King forever." They are focused upon worshipping God. He was, is and will be King, yesterday, today and forever. That is the purpose of worship. To ascribe this glory to God.

God will share His glory with none other. He will not share it with the preacher; He will not share it with the pianist. And when nature calls us to worship on Tuesday, He will not share the glory with chance, with the thunder, with the hail. Our awe at the power of nature

should be translated into awe at the power and majesty of the King who commands the weather. In the last few weeks we have seen some pretty amazing weather, haven't we? It comes from an amazing God.

And Romans 1 says that the moment our attention turns from serving God to serving the creation, we have lost our purpose and have become idolaters. The same is true on Sunday. The moment our attention turns from serving God to the things that attend worship; the moment we come to worship to be served, rather than to serve, then we will find the blessing of the second half of this verse is not ours. The first goal of worship is critical. If we are to have the blessing of verse 11, then we must come to worship with the attitude of verse 10 and the last phrase of verse 9. If you are focused on what you give rather than on what you receive, distractions are not quite as important.

But having done that, the second goal of worship becomes true and the worshiper who comes to offer sacrificial worship finds that God pours out refreshing grace into his own life. It says, "The LORD will give strength to His people; The LORD will bless His people with peace." That's a second great reason to come to worship: "The LORD will give strength to His people; The LORD will bless His people with shalom." Shalom is the reversal of everything lost in the Fall. It is health, prosperity, blessing, inner peace, outer peace.

So this psalm starts with a call to worship and it ends with a pronouncement of the blessings that come to God's worshipers. Why is it then that we are often not strengthened in worship? Why is it that we don't find His supernatural peace? In some churches, worship committees are constantly trying one thing after another to change the environment of worship in the hopes that people will be blessed. I think this psalm gives us a hint. *If we don't find God present in the storm, it is doubtful we will find Him present in the pew. If God is not at the center of our lives six days a week, it is doubtful He will fill our hearts one day a week. Calvin summarized the entire Christian life with the phrase, "coram deo," meaning, before the face of God. The Christian life is a life lived in the personal presence of God.*

V. Conclusion

My conclusion is this: There is no need to blot out reality in order to worship God. That is like saying that I must blot out all the works of God so that I can experience God working. It is a contradiction. And I have found myself with all distractions removed, all by myself in my study, and my heart still wandered, and I was still unable to worship. Why? Because my *heart* did not have an attitude of worship.

In America we try to shut out the world so that we can tune in to God. David had learned how to tune in to God wherever he was. It may have been one of the reasons why God led me to interrupt my Joshua series and preach a short series on practicing the presence by meditating on God's attributes. But in David's case he was caught in a thunderstorm. He didn't need to go to the temple or the synagogue to be spurred to worship. He constant lived before God's heavenly temple. So let me end by reading that quote from R. C. Sproul Sr. one more time:

“The big idea of the Christian life is coram Deo. Coram Deo captures the essence of the Christian life.”

This phrase literally refers to something that takes place in the presence of, or before the face of, God. To live coram Deo is to live one’s entire life in the presence of God, under the authority of God, to the glory of God.

May that more and more become a reality for each of us. Amen.