

Preaching as Worship: Meditations on Expository Exultation

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[Editor's Introduction: We are pleased to present to our readers Dr. Piper's impassioned plea for worshipful preaching, originally given orally as the Bernard H. Rom Lectures in Preaching at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, November 2-3, 1994. While edited slightly to suit them for this written format, the article retains much of the flavor of the original oral addresses. Putting the lectures into a more "academic" style, we felt, would have detracted from their impact and message.]

I. THE WORSHIP THAT COMES BY THE WORD: Satisfaction in the Greatness of God

I want to begin by posing a question about the relationship between contemporary worship songs and preaching. I think most of us would agree that the last twenty years have seen a phenomenal explosion of "contemporary worship music"; songs like Jack Hayford's Majesty and Graham Kendrick's Shine, Jesus, Shine and dozens of others-Thou Art Worthy; Father I Adore You; Open Our Eyes Lord; We Worship and Adore You; Thou, O Lord, Art a Shield about Me; You are Lord; and on and on. The common vocabulary of contemporary worship songs today is astonishing in evangelicalism and beyond.

Some of them are grammatically, poetically, and musically deplorable (which we shouldn't make too much of if we grew up on the likes of Do Lord, Oh, Do Lord . . .). Every explosion has its fluff. But one thing is unmistakable as a trend in these songs: they are, by and large, and in a new way, God-ward. All the ones I mentioned address God in the second person. They are sung to God directly, not merely to each other about God. Therefore they force the issue of worship as a God-ward act-an engagement of the heart with the living God as the song is sung. Add to this that these contemporary tunes are emotionally moving. They are composed in such a way as to awaken and carry affections. They are not excessively complex or intellectual or demanding, but catch the heart up into their mood.

So two things happen in the best contemporary worship songs: the mind is brought to focus on God with words that are usually biblical (much more so than the spiritual choruses of previous generations); and the heart is moved by the music with a mood of tenderness or devotion or enjoyment (at least this is true for millions of ordinary Christians).

So as we look at the "worship awakening" over the last twenty years or so, what stands out to me as astonishing is that its content is so God-centered and God-exalting. "He is Lord, risen from the dead"; "he is majestic"; "he is mighty"; "he is holy"; "he has conquered the power of death"; "he is a shield about us, our glory, the lifter of our heads"; "he is King of kings, Lord of lords, Emmanuel, great and wonderful, our Rock, our Fortress, our Deliverer, the coming King, Redeemer, Name above all names, precious Lamb of God, Messiah, Holy One"; "he is our God"; and "our God reigns."

Whatever you think of the drums, the electric guitar and bass and amplification and T-shirts and platforms cluttered with wires and mikes and speakers, it is unmistakable-the dominant theme of these songs is God-the character of God, the power of God, the mercy of God, the authority of God, and the fatherhood of God. And the hoped-for effect of relentlessly addressing God directly in the second person is engagement-genuine, real, spiritual engagement-of the heart with God.

But there is another remarkable fact of the last twenty years or so, and it has to do with preaching. My observation is that the preaching that follows this music in most churches has moved in exactly the opposite direction from the musical worship awakening. While the worship songs have moved God-ward, preaching has moved man-ward. While the worship songs focus our attention again and again on the character of God and the great works of God, preaching focuses on contemporary issues, personal problems, relationships. While the worship songs lift us into the presence of God, preaching gives advice on how to get along better on earth. No one would say today the same thing about preaching that we have seen in the "worship awakening"-namely, that there has been a great resurgence of God-centeredness, or a great moving of the spirit of God-wardness in the pulpit, or a focus on God's character and mighty acts in the preaching of evangelicalism. Rather, I think most would agree that preaching has moved in the other direction: relational, anecdotal, humorous, casual, laid-back, absorbed in human need, fixed on relational dynamics, heavily saturated with psychological categories, wrapped up in strategies for emotional healing.

This very different development in singing and preaching begs for an explanation. I'm sure the answer is more complex than I can presently understand or explain. But I want to suggest one possible answer that highlights the need for my focus in these lectures. Why have we preachers not followed the lead of worship music into a sustained focus on the greatness of God and the majesty of his name and the glory of his works? Why is the subject matter and the focus of preaching so different from that of contemporary worship songs?

One aspect of the explanation is that the God-centered lyrics of the worship songs have one great advantage over preaching-they are accompanied by heart-engaging music. The words would never in themselves hold the interest of the worshipers and never release the affections for God as they do in connection with the music. Therefore, one might say, the music is what makes God-centered lyrics palatable to contemporary evangelicals, who are basically a-theological and who would not be stirred by them without the moving music. Without the music the words would be considered dry, irrelevant, distant, unengaging. Or we can put it more generously than that. We could say: to the degree that the tunes are pleasing and stirring and heart-engaging, the worshiper is genuinely opened to at least some of the significance of the truth about God himself and indeed brought to experience the reality of that very God.

However you put it-negatively: the music makes God-centeredness palatable; or positively: the music opens the heart to the true joy of God-centeredness-we preachers know that our words have to stand or fall without the help of music.

And yet almost every preacher-and rightly so!-wants to accomplish what music accomplishes. We want to move the heart. We want to stir the emotions as well as stock the mind. We want to awaken heart-felt affections as well as win intellectual assent.

And right here many preachers, I fear, make a fateful, mistaken judgment. They reason: since I do not have music to accompany me in my preaching, I cannot, with a God-centered message, hold or move the hearts of my people and engage their emotions. Doctrine and theological portraits of God, a focus on his supremacy and a spirit of transcendence will simply not hold and move a contemporary audience-not without music to sustain the mood. What holds a contemporary audience verbally is not a message about God but a message about divorce or drugs or parenting or anger or success or abuse or intimacy or depression.

In other words, the common strategy of preachers today for awakening people's emotions and engaging their hearts is to find the areas of human life where the emotions are already running high and where the hearts are already engaged; and then we root the sermon there: the

pain in the marriage; the anguish of wayward teenagers; the stress at work; the power of sexual temptation; the breakdown of community; the woundedness of past abuses; the absence of intimacy and vulnerability. We preachers know that if we plant our sermons here-if we tend this garden with modest skill in anecdote and illustration and personal vulnerability-we will move the hearts of our hearers; we will accomplish what the worship tunes accomplish. Our listeners will experience the good feelings of empathy, and we will feel the satisfaction of attentive, resonating faces.

Now at this point I could put either a positive or a negative spin on this development in preaching. Positively, I could say: a lot of preaching is in touch with where people are and where they feel pain, and that is certainly not a bad thing. Preaching that is ignorant of people and unempathetic with their pain will not bear biblical fruit.

But there is also a negative spin that we can put on this development-one that I do indeed put on it, and one that helps explain my burden in these lectures. It is this: the reason we preachers do not believe that the greatness of God, the spirit of transcendence, the glory and majesty of Christ, the deep things of the Spirit, will move the hearts of our people and awaken profound affections is that these things do not move us; they don't awaken our affections. We preachers prefer to read books about anger and intimacy and marriage and success and all manner of how-to strategies for home and work and church, than to read books about God. Ask any publisher what sells-even to pastors.

What gets preachers' juices flowing is a new psychological angle on family dysfunction; a new strategy for mobilizing lay people; a new tactic for time management; a fresh approach to dealing with depression; an empathetic focus on his own resentments and pain and anger after years of being beat up by carnal Christians. But not a book about God. Not the infinite expanse of God's character. Not the inexhaustible riches of the glory of God in Christ.

So this is why I think there is a cleavage between worship music and preaching. I would say, paradoxically, that preachers are not really trying to go in a different direction from contemporary worship music. In fact, we preachers want desperately to sustain some of the same interest and enjoyment and engagement in our preaching. We want the same thing to happen emotionally in our preaching that happens in emotionally charged times of worship. And since we are persuaded that it just won't happen with God-centeredness, we seek it with empathetic human pain-centeredness. We find the engaging itch and we scratch it.

I don't think that this tension between God-focused worship lyrics and human-focused preaching can go on indefinitely. Either the God-centered worship singing will be pulled down, or the human-saturated preaching will be pulled up. My aim in these lectures is to plead for preaching to be pulled up-not away from the pain of the people, but, along with the pain of the people, into the presence of God, whose presence and reality alone is the final answer. My conviction is that the aim of preaching-no less than singing-is God-exalting worship. And not only that, my conviction is-hence the title of these lectures-that true biblical preaching is worship.

In other words, in the same way that a melody can awaken us to the true beauty of God in the lyrics of a worship song, so the spiritual music of the preacher's soul can awaken the people to the glory of the preached truth of God. When the Word comes worshipping, it will beget worship. When preaching is not just expository but expository exultation-that's my definition of preaching-it will move the hearers, and it will engage the heart with the presence and glory of God.

Now it may be that someone would say, "Well, what's wrong with having a God-centered worship time in song followed by an empathetic human-centered word from God about our problems?" What's wrong with it is that preaching is meant by God to catch people up into worship, not to be a practical human application after worship. The aim of preaching is to deal with divorce worshipfully, and to deal with teenagers worshipfully, and to deal with anger worshipfully. Preaching exalts the centrality of God in all of life or it is not Christian preaching.

Let me point to three biblical reasons for believing this-that preaching is meant to be and to kindle God-exalting worship.

First, I believe it because the Word of God says that everything is to be done in a worshipful, God-centered way: "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31); "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col 3:17). If everything is to be radically oriented on magnifying the glory of God and exalting the name of Jesus, how much more preaching. Whatever preaching deals with-and it is to deal with everything-it must be done with a view to begetting and sustaining worship-the valuing and cherishing and displaying of the glory of God.

Second, I believe that preaching is meant to exalt the centrality of God because the Word says that God himself exalts his own centrality in all that he does. And preaching is one of the great things that God does. God's Word in Isa 48:11 is like a great banner flying over all his acts from creation to consummation: "For My own sake, for My own sake, I will act; For how can My name be profaned? And My glory I will not give to another." He chose us and predestined us for his glory (Eph 1:6), he created us for his glory (Isa 43:7), he saved us for his glory (Eph 1:14); he sanctifies us for his glory (2 Thess 1:12). All God does he does to magnify his glory in the earth. Preaching is one of the great things that God does. It is God's work. And therefore the mission of preaching is the mission of God: "I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth" (Ps 46:10). Our aim is worship-the valuing and cherishing and displaying of the greatness and the glory of God.

Finally, I believe that preaching is meant to exalt the centrality of God because the NT teaches that the appointed end of preaching is faith, and faith is the primary covenant requirement of God, precisely because it humbles us and amplifies the trustworthiness and all-sufficiency of God. Repeatedly Paul lines up preaching with faith as its goal: "How shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? . . . So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom 10:14, 17). "Since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through its wisdom, God was pleased through the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe" (1 Cor 1:21). "My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God" (1 Cor 2:4-5; cf. also Rom 16:25f; 1 Cor 15:11, 14.) The aim of preaching is to beget and sustain faith. Why? Because faith magnifies the power and trustworthiness of God. This is why Paul loves the model of Abraham: Abraham "grew strong in his faith, giving glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to what he had promised" (Rom 4:20). The heart of saving faith is a spiritual apprehension of the glorious trustworthiness of God in Christ and an earnest embracing of all that God is for us in Christ to satisfy the hunger of the soul.

That is the way Jesus described faith in John 6:35: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst." Believing in Jesus means coming to him for the quenching of our souls' thirst. Faith in Christ is being satisfied with all that

God is for us in Jesus. When we experience that, we magnify the preciousness and worth of God, because God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him-which means we worship.

The aim of preaching, whatever the topic, whatever the text, is this kind of faith-to quicken in the soul a satisfaction with all that God is for us in Jesus, because this satisfaction magnifies God's all-sufficient glory; and that is worship. Therefore the mission of all preaching is soul-satisfying, God-exalting worship.

II. THE WORD THAT KINDLES WORSHIP: Showing the Glories of God

Worship, we have argued, is implicit in saving faith because God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. So biblical preaching always aims to quicken and sustain God-exalting satisfaction in God. James Henry Thornwell expresses this thought in a letter he wrote about beginning his ministry in South Carolina in 1834. Henry Ward Beecher called Thornwell "the most brilliant minister in the Old School Presbyterian Church." [2] Thornwell said, I felt that a new era had commenced in my life in that I was no longer a citizen of the world, but an ambassador of God, standing in the stead of Jesus Christ and beseeching men to turn from the unsatisfying vanities of a fleeting life and to fix their hopes on the enduring sources of beatitude which surrounds the throne of God.[3] In other words, the task of preaching is to warn people about the futility of the broken cisterns of sin that hold no water (Jer 2:13) and to compel them with truth and power to come to the fountain of living water that satisfies forever.

Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters;
And you who have no money come, buy and eat.
Come, buy wine and milk
Without money and without cost.
Why do you spend money for what is not bread,
And your wages for what does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good,
And delight yourself in abundance. (Isa 55:1-2)

That's the essence of preaching. The best way to glorify an inexhaustible fountain is to keep on drinking and to keep on being so satisfied with that fountain that nothing can draw you away. And therefore the task of preaching is to display the all-satisfying glories of God in such a way that the power of all competing pleasures is broken and God himself holds people captive. For in his presence is fullness of joy and at his right hand are pleasures forevermore (Ps 16:11).

I have also argued that preaching can make its own music. It doesn't need to domesticate its message and to be limited to scratching where people itch. And it doesn't need the music of organ or piano or synthesizer or guitar to make its God-exalting theme palatable. What it needs is the Spirit-given singing of the soul of the preacher. When the worship-seeking Word comes, it must come worshipping. When preaching is worship, the people will be moved. James Stewart, the great Scottish preacher, has a section on this in his book, *Heralds of God*, where he says,

If in a congregation one soul here and another there may be receiving, as the sermon proceeds, some vision of the majesty of God, some glimpse of the loveliness of Christ, some revelation of personal need beneath the searchlight of the Spirit, is the ministry of the Word to be minimized, or regarded as less divine . . . than other parts of the service? Is not such preaching worship?[4]

And I would stress that it is worship-not just because it awakens a satisfying sense of God's glory in the people, but also because it exhibits a satisfying sense of God's glory in the preacher.

Now we must make clear that preaching pursues its aim of worship not merely through the preaching exultation, but through expository exultation. The song of his heart has power, but it is God's power only when he is singing over the Truth. Therefore I have defined preaching as expository exultation. Not just exultation, but expository exultation. By exposition I mean exactly what John Stott means, as he puts it in his book, *Between Two Worlds*:

It is my contention that all true Christian preaching is expository preaching. Of course, if by an "expository" sermon is meant a verse-by-verse explanation of a lengthy passage of Scripture, then indeed it is only one possible way of preaching, but this would be a misuse of the word. Properly speaking, "exposition" has a much broader meaning. It refers to the content of the sermon (biblical truth) rather than its style (a running commentary). To expound Scripture is to bring out of the text what is there and expose it to view. The expositor pries open what appears to be closed, makes plain what is obscure, unravels what is knotted and unfolds what is tightly packed. The opposite of exposition is "imposition," which is to impose on the text what is not there. But the "text" in question could be a verse, or a sentence, or even a single word. It could equally be a paragraph, or a chapter, or a whole book. The size of the text is immaterial, so long as it is biblical. What matters is what we do with it. Whether it is long or short, our responsibility as expositors is to open it up in such a way that it speaks its message clearly, plainly, accurately, relevantly. [5]

When I call preaching "expository exultation" that's what I mean by "expository." "To expound Scripture," Stott says, "is to bring out of the text what is there and expose it to view." And what is there in Scripture mainly is God. The all-pervasive, all-important, all-surpassing reality in every text is God. Whether he is commanding or warning or promising or teaching, he is there. And where he is, he is always supreme. And where he is supreme, he will be worshiped. Therefore the overarching, pervasive, relentless subject of preaching is God himself with a view to being worshiped.

Therefore we ask-as every preacher must ask who knows this aim of preaching-how can I awaken the slumbering passions of God's people for the surpassing worth of knowing God and his Son, Jesus Christ? How can I kindle the flame of knowledge and faith that says, there is none like Christ, there is no treasure, no pleasure, no perk, no profit, no prize, no reward, no wife, no child, like Christ; that says, "for me to live is Christ and to die is gain"? How shall we preach to beget and sustain such a passion for God?

The answer is at least this: in our preaching we must display from Scripture, week in and week out, the glories of God in Christ. It won't do briefly to say that Christ is great or that our mission is to glorify God, and then hasten on to speak of other things. Oh how many preachers in pulpits, and teachers in Christian colleges and seminaries, and Christian counselors, account for their God-neglecting sermons and syllabi and sessions by saying: well, God is the foundation of all we say, we assume that; we take that for granted. But more and more I have come to believe that God does not like being taken for granted. The whole point of the creation of the universe is to display God. The heavens are telling the glory of God; day unto day pours forth speech. The point of the incarnation is to display God. The point of preaching is to display God. The analogy of God as a foundation is an utterly inadequate analogy to account for how God relates to our work. Cement block foundations are indispensable-but who thinks about them, talks about them, loves them, worships them? They are forgotten.

God did not put his glory on display in creation and redemption in order that it might be taken for granted as a foundation beneath the building of our church activity, or the school of our academic enterprise, or the clinic of our psychological techniques, or the house of our leisure.

Woe to us if we get our satisfaction from the food in the kitchen and the TV in the den and the sex in the bedroom with an occasional tribute to the cement blocks in the basement! God wills to be displayed and known and loved and cherished and worshiped always and everywhere and in every act-especially preaching.

We will awaken worship in our people when we stop treating God as an out-of-sight foundation for all the other things we like to talk about, and instead start talking about the glories-glories, plural-of God himself and his Son, Jesus:

his value and worth;

his triumphs past, present, and future, over sin and death and hell and Satan;

his knowledge, that makes the Library of Congress look like a matchbox, and quantum physics like a first-grade reader;

his wisdom that has never been and never can be counseled by men;

his authority over heaven and earth, without whose permission no demon can move an inch;

his providence, without which not a bird falls to the ground or a single hair turns gray;

his word, that upholds the universe and keeps all the atoms and molecules together;

his power to walk on water, and cleanse lepers, and heal the lame, and open the eyes of the blind, and cause the deaf to

hear, and to still storms with a word, and raise the dead;

his purity never to sin;

his trustworthiness never to break his word or let one promise fall to the ground;

his justice, to render all accounts settled either in hell or on the cross;

his patience, to endure our dullness for decades;

his endurance, to embrace the excruciating pain of the cross willingly;

his wrath, that will one day cause people to call out for the rocks and the mountains to fall on them;

his grace, that justifies the ungodly; and

his love, that led him to die for us even while we were sinners.

If we want to beget worship through preaching we have to bring the glory of God up out of the basement and put it in the window. We have to stop speaking in vague, passing generalizations about God's glory and begin to describe the specific contours of his perfections. The task of the sermon week in and week out is to help our people bring into sharp focus a fresh picture of why God is the all-satisfying Treasure of their lives. People are seldom moved by vague allusions to the greatness of God. They need to see some particular, concrete, stunning representation of his greatness-some fresh angle on an old glory, that makes people say with Paul: I count everything as loss for the surpassing value of knowing this Christ.

For example, last week I was reading my devotions in John 8, and this word bolted off the page: "Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he shall never see death." Now there's a text for the glory of the authority and power of Jesus. Who today could stand before a TV camera and look out over the world of humankind and say, "If anyone keeps my word, he will never see death"? In other words, "I have absolute power over death and I have absolute authority over the life of every human being. If you keep my word, just when death raises its ugly face and reaches out its horrid claws, in the last split second of your life I will come and take you. You will not even see its grisly face." You either put that man behind bars or you bow down and worship. But you don't trifle with him. If our people are going to worship, they must

see the glories of Christ and be satisfied with all that God is for them in Jesus. That is the task of preaching: show them the glories.

A final point on this matter. Just as there is a tendency today to take the glory of God for granted and to keep it in the basement as the assumed foundation for other topics, in the same way there is a similar tendency to hide the actual wording of the biblical text as the unseen foundation of the sermon. There seems to exist the idea that to tell people to look with you at the words and phrases of the text as you make your points is academic or pedantic-that it smacks of school and lectures which have boring connotations and so don't hold the attention or stir affections, let alone assist worship.

I want to plead otherwise. Our people need to see that what we say about God comes from the Word of God. We should not ask them to take our word for it. We should show it. Our aim is to show the glories of Christ with the authority of God's words, not ours. Our ideas about the glories of Christ are of no great importance. What matters is what God says about the glory of God. And it matters that the people see that it is God who says it and not us. And showing them the very words and phrases and clauses that display the glory of Christ does not have to be pedantic or boring. I am pleading not merely that what you show of Christ really be from the text, but that you demonstrate to your people that it is from the text, that you deflect the authority away from yourself to the text, and that you enable them to see it and hold it from the text for themselves.

I close this section with an example. My aim in preaching is that God be glorified through the people's being satisfied in him, that God become so gloriously all-satisfying in their lives that nothing can lure them away from him. I open to them Matt 13:44 and read, "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field." And I say to them, "Look at this. How valuable, how precious is the kingdom of heaven? Is it valuable enough to lose everything you have in order to get it-your house, your wedding ring, your car, and stocks and retirement portfolio and books and computer and clothes and health insurance?" And they say, "Yes, it says that here: he sold all he has to get that field-to have the kingdom." And I say, "Yes, so far so good. But how valuable is it really? Is that all Jesus wanted us to feel-that the kingdom is worth losing everything for? That we can count everything as rubbish for the surpassing value of having the kingdom of heaven? No, there's another phrase here. Don't miss it. It makes all the difference in the world. It has made all the difference in my life. It makes all the difference in my preaching. Do you see it? Do you see it in God's Word and not my word? 'And from joy over it, he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field.' It's the joy that drives him. The power to 'let goods and kindred go,' the power that overcomes the health, wealth, and prosperity 'gospel,' the power that severs us from all the fleeting pleasures of sin, the power that binds us to God and holds us there enthralled is the joy of the all-satisfying glory of the kingdom of God. Read it. Read the very words. 'And from joy over it-from joy, he sold all that he had.' All sacrifice, all obedience, all worship is the impulse of this joy in God." This is the goal of God, the goal of life, the goal of preaching: God-exalting joy in the kingdom of God.

III. THE WORD THAT COMES WORSHIPING: Savoring What we Say about God

The aim of preaching is worship. That is, all preaching should aim to wean the human heart off the breast of sin and bring it to satisfaction in God as the Fountain of Life. The assumption here is this: God is most glorified in our people when our people are most satisfied in him. That is, the essence and heart of worship is being satisfied with all that God is for us in

Christ. And, if the mission of preaching is to beget and sustain a satisfying, liberating sense of the glory of God in the human heart, then the matter of preaching must be the glories of God and of his Son, Jesus. The people can't savor what they don't see. Our task is to show the glories of God—concretely, specifically, compellingly, and not from our own imagination but from the revelation of that glory in God's Word. Therefore, all Christian preaching is expository. It "exposes" the all-satisfying God as he speaks and reveals himself in Scripture.

And the mission of preaching is worship, and the matter of preaching is the manifold glories of God revealed in Scripture. Now what about the manner of the preaching? I have agreed with James Stewart that preaching not only aims at worship, but is worship. Therefore I have defined it as expository exultation. Preaching should not only awaken a satisfying sense of God's glory in the people; it should also exhibit a satisfying sense of God's glory in the preacher. It exalts the perfections of God, and it exults in those perfections in the process.

It is for this reason that the preacher does not need the music of piano or guitar or synthesizer to make his God-exalting sermon palatable, the way contemporary worship songs are assisted by the music to draw people into their God-exalting lyrics. The preacher does not need to forsake the centrality of God, nor does he need the support of any music but the music of his own soul. When the preacher's own soul exults and sings and worships over the truth that he preaches he makes his own music, and the hearts of the people are engaged with the value of his God.

I will try now to root these points more deeply in Scripture. I would like to focus first on Phil 1:18-21. Paul writes from imprisonment in Rome. Those who don't like him are gloating over the fact that they are free to preach and he is not. But Paul is not discouraged by this, but says,

What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice. For I know that this shall turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope that I shall not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

Notice what Paul's mission is: above life and death his mission is to magnify Christ, to show that Christ is magnificent, to exalt Christ, and demonstrate that he is great—"that Christ shall be exalted in my body, whether by life or death." Now comes a tremendously important verse to explain how it is that Christ could be exalted in life and death. Notice the reference to "life" and "death" in v. 20 and then the link up with the words "live" and "die" in v. 21: "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." What I want you to see here is the connection between magnifying Christ and treasuring Christ. What this text teaches is that if you want to exalt and magnify Christ (for example, in your preaching), then you have to treasure Christ above all things. If Christ is to be proclaimed for the praise of our people, he must be preached as the prize of the preacher. We can't declare him worthy of praise if we don't delight in him as our prize. Paul makes this explicit in the connection between vv. 20 and 21. In v. 20 he says that his expectation and hope is to magnify, exalt, glorify Christ in life or death. Then in v. 21 he shows how Christ can be magnified in life or death. He says, "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain." So the way that Christ is magnified in death is to experience death as gain. And the reason death is gain is given in v. 23: "My desire is to depart [i.e., die] and be with Christ." Death takes us into more intimacy with Christ. Therefore death is gain. And when you experience death this way, you show that Christ is a greater treasure to you than anything on earth. And that is magnifying Christ.

The key to praising is prizing.

If you want to glorify Christ in your dying, you must experience death as gain-which means Christ must be gain to you. He must be your prize, your treasure, your joy. He must be a satisfaction so deep that when death takes away everything you love, but gives you more of Christ, you feel it as gain. It's the same with life. We magnify Christ in life, Paul says, by experiencing Christ in life as our all-surpassing treasure. That's what he means in v. 21 when he says "For me to live is Christ." We know this because of Phil 3:8, where Paul says, "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ."

So "to die is gain" because it means greater intimacy with Christ-he is our treasure and what we long for more than anything. And "to live is Christ" because living means counting everything as loss for the sake of gaining Christ. The common denominator between living and dying is that Christ is the all-satisfying treasure that we embrace. And this truth in v. 21 is given as the explanation and ground of v. 20 (see the "for" in v. 21), namely, that for this reason Paul knows that Christ will be exalted, magnified, praised in his living and in his dying.

Christ is praised by being prized. He is magnified as a glorious treasure when he becomes our unrivaled pleasure. Christ is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. This is the biblical foundation for that all-important sentence. [6] This is the music the preacher must make. The preacher's song is this: Christ is my treasure in life; Christ is my gain in death; Christ is the all-satisfying fountain of my hope and peace and joy; I count everything as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. And when the thread of that song is woven through the fabric of all your God-exalting sermons, it will awaken and engage the hearts of your people more deeply than all the best tunes of contemporary worship songs put together. If you would draw them into praising Christ, they must see you prizing Christ.

This is why the ministry of preaching, with all its pain and pressure, is a great and happy work. James W. Alexander gets it exactly right when he says in his *Thoughts on Preaching*, "There is happiness in preaching. . . . The declaration of what one believes, and the praise of what one loves, always give delight: and what but this is the minister's work?" [7] Preaching is the declaration of what one believes, in a way that praises what one loves. It is expository exultation.

About a year ago I began to spend a good bit of time with John Owen, the seventeenth-century pastor whom J. I. Packer calls "the greatest among the Puritan theologians." And I found in him a magnificent model of what I am trying to get across in this final message.

Owen warned against the danger of preaching without penetrating into the things we say and making them real to our own souls. Over the years words begin to come easy for preachers, and we find we can speak of mysteries without standing in awe; we can speak of purity without feeling pure; we can speak of zeal without spiritual passion; of God's holiness without trembling; of sin without sorrow; of heaven without eagerness. And the result is a terrible deadening of the spiritual life and depletion of preaching power. Words came easy for Owen, but he set himself against this terrible disease of inauthenticity by laboring to experience every truth he preached. In my words, he aimed not just at exposition but at exultation. He said:

I hold myself bound in conscience and in honor, not even to imagine that I have attained a proper knowledge of any one article of truth, much less to publish [i.e., preach] it, unless through the Holy Spirit I have had such a taste of it, in its spiritual sense, that I may be able, from the heart, to say with the psalmist, "I have believed, and therefore I have spoken." (Works, X, p. 488)

So, for example, his Exposition of Psalm 130 (320 pages on eight verses) is the laying open not only of the psalm, but of his own heart. One of his biographers, Andrew Thomson, says,

When Owen . . . laid open the book of God, he laid open at the same time the book of his own heart and of his own history. . . . [It] is rich in golden thoughts, and instinct with the living experience of "one who spake what he knew, and testified what he had seen." (Works I, p. lxxxiv)

The conviction that controlled Owen was this:

A man preacheth that sermon only well unto others which preacheth itself in his own soul. And he that doth not feed on and thrive in the digestion of the food which he provides for others will scarce make it savoury unto them; yea, he knows not but the food he hath provided may be poison, unless he have really tasted of it himself. If the word do not dwell with power in us, it will not pass with power from us. (Works, xvi, p. 76)

Owen's life was full of controversy and upheaval. He was an incredibly busy and embattled man. Richard Baxter called him "the great doer." What kept him steady in the battle was this commitment first to experience the reality of God and then preach it. Here is the way he put it in the Preface to *The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated* (1655):

When the heart is cast indeed into the mould of the doctrine that the mind embraceth,- when the evidence and necessity of the truth abides in us,-when not the sense of the words only is in our heads, but the sense of the thing abides in our hearts-when we have communion with God in the doctrine we contend for-then shall we be garrisoned by the grace of God against all the assaults of men. (Works I, pp. lxiii-lxiv)

There's the key: living, heartfelt "communion with God in the doctrine we contend for"-exultation in God through our exposition of God.

At the end of his life in 1683 at the age of seventy-seven, as a kind of fugitive pastor in London, Owen was working on a book called, *Meditations on the Glory of Christ*. It was the last thing he chose to think about. His friend William Payne was helping him edit the work. Near the end Owen said, "O, brother Payne, the long-wished for day is come at last, in which I shall see the glory in another manner than I have ever done or was capable of doing in this world." [8] In other words, "to die is gain!" But Owen saw more glory in this world than most of us see, and that is why he was known for his holiness, and that's why, even three hundred years later, his preaching has a God-exalting power that most contemporary preaching does not even aspire to. He saw and experienced the glory of Christ before he preached it. So his preaching was real and powerful because its mission was worship, its matter was the glory of Christ, and its manner was exultation.

I could well add one more topic to this discussion. I have talked about the mission of preaching-awakening in the people a heartfelt satisfaction in all that God is for us in Christ; the matter of preaching-proclaiming the all-satisfying glories of God; and the manner of preaching-exhibiting that very satisfaction in God by exulting over what we preach. But I could go on and speak also about the means of preaching-how do you become that kind of preacher and sustain a heartfelt exultation in the great things of God?

But I content myself with an outline of what I would want to say.

1. You must be born again. "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). I do not doubt that there are preachers who have no life in the pulpit because there is no life in the soul. The natural person cannot receive, let alone exult in the things of the Spirit. If you do not delight in the things of God, search your heart to see if you are born of God.

2. Turn off the television. It is not necessary for relevance. And it is a deadly place to rest the mind. Its pervasive banality, sexual innuendo, and God-ignoring values have no ennobling effects on the preacher's soul. It kills the spirit. It drives God away. It quenches prayer. It blanks out the Bible. It cheapens the soul. It destroys spiritual power. It defiles almost everything. I have taught and preached for twenty years now and never owned a television. It is unnecessary for most of you, and it is spiritually deadly for all of you.

3. Meditate on the Word of God day and night. Paul said, "Do not get drunk with wine . . . but be filled with the Spirit" (Eph 5:18). How do you get filled with the Spirit? The same way you get drunk with wine: you drink a lot of it. And Paul is pretty clear about how we drink the Spirit. In 1 Cor 2:14 it is by welcoming the things of the Spirit of God; and in Rom 8:5 it is by setting the mind on the things of the Spirit. And in both cases the "things of the Spirit" refers mainly to the words taught by the Spirit (1 Cor 2:13). This means simply that if you want to be filled with the Spirit of passion and exultation over the great things of God, you must fill your mind day and night with the Word of God. Pour over it. Memorize it. Chew it. Put it like a lozenge under the tongue of your soul and let it flavor your affections day and night.

4. Plead with God unceasingly for passions that match his reality. When you meditate on a passage of Scripture ask yourself this question: Am I experiencing affections in my heart that accord with the reality revealed in the text? Is my exposition creating in my own heart a corresponding exultation? And if not, then repent for your hardheartedness and plead with God for your heart to be stirred with emotions as terrible as hell and as wonderful as heaven.

John Stott said, I have always found it helpful to do as much of my sermon preparation as possible on my knees, with the Bible open before me, in prayerful study. This is not because I am a bibliolater and worship the Bible; but because I worship the God of the Bible and desire . . . to pray earnestly that the eyes of my heart may be enlightened. [\[9\]](#)

5. Linger in the presence of God-besotted saints. Heb 13:7 says, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the Word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith." It is a biblical value to have God-besotted heroes. I fear that many contemporary pastors read more Barna and Shaller and Drucker than they do Owen and Edwards and Spurgeon (to name my heroes).

Judge for yourselves: what writers are so saturated with God that you come away with your mind rich and your heart exulting? Find your God-besotted heroes and live with them.

6. Finally, leave your study, go to a hard place, take a risk for the kingdom, and prove to your own soul that you treasure the promises of God more than the pleasures of this world. ". . . like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man finds and from joy over it sells everything he has to buy that field."

Endnotes

[\[2\]](#) D. Kelly, *Preachers with Power: Four Stalwarts of the South* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992) 67.

[\[3\]](#) Kelly, *Preachers with Power*, 64.

[\[4\]](#) J. Stewart, *Heralds of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972) 73.

[\[5\]](#) J. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 125-26.

[\[6\]](#) I have tried to unpack this sentence, "God is most glorified in us, when we are most satisfied in him," in two books: *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1986) and *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1991).

[\[7\]](#) J. W. Alexander, *Thoughts on Preaching* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975, orig. 1864) 117.

[\[8\]](#) P. Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Exeter, Devon: Paternoster, 1971) 171.

[\[9\]](#) Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 222.

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