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Power Up

Psalm 33

Introduction

I'm a computer programmer. I'm from the very first generation of kids who got a computer at home, and messed about with it, trying to learn how it worked and how to make it do something interesting.

In my case, it worked. What started off as a hobby for a 13 year old became a university degree, and then a job I've been doing for 36 years. If you've ever had to call for the ambulance or the fire brigade, it's partly my code that gets you through to the right people and helps them to find you even when you might not know where you are yourself.

At the start though, it was mainly games. I used to type them out from magazine listings, and I made a few up myself. I must have lost my company a few hundred man-hours of work when I wrote a version of Tetris that ran on the work computers. Everyone was having a shot and trying to beat the high score.

And games nowadays aren't very different from the ones back in the day. They might look flashier, but there's usually an objective, some controls, some way of scoring how you're doing, and a way of ending the game when you fail.

One thing that arrived early on was the idea of a power up: some ability that would enhance your character and change the mood of the game a bit. Pacman could eat a power pill and get to chase the ghosts for a while. In a racing game, you could get a reward that would make your car faster, or in a shooting game you could get lasers instead of bullets. A power up makes you more effective, though sometimes only for a while.

In case you're thinking this is only relevant for computer games, remember that chess and draughts have power ups as well. In both games if a piece gets to the top of the board you get to turn it into something different.

Sometimes I think our Christian walk needs a bit of a power up. Life can be draining. It can be monotonous. It can be discouraging. But God wants us to live more abundant lives. So how do we get there? Well, I think this psalm gives us a bit of a help.

Background

The psalms are songs of course, meant to be sung by the believers in lots of different situations. Many, maybe most, are addressed to God. They are prayers as well as songs. This one is a bit different, however. We're meant to sing it to each other. It's a teaching song, and a song of encouragement. We are to sing it to each other to power up our walk with God. Let's have a look at what it says.

Shout for Joy

"*Shout for joy*". That's how it starts. And already I'm struggling. I'm quite a quiet person. I don't like to make a noise, especially in public. Admittedly I did shout for joy on Wednesday night there, during the world cup match, but I was in the house and only Claire heard me. It's a bit embarrassing when you are loud and people look at you. It's a bit unseemly, isn't it?

Not according to the psalmist. "*Praise befits the upright.*" Now, it is unseemly to draw attention to ourselves. We don't like people who are always saying "look at me". But to draw attention to God, and to do it joyfully, is a good thing. I knew a lady once who came along to a children's camp we were having. Her son was one of the kids and she came as a visitor one night. She was converted that night, and do you know what convinced her to follow Christ? It wasn't the sermon. It was seeing Christians enjoying a great time together, playing games, singing songs and hearing God's word. She thought Christians were dull folk, who never had any fun, but that visit changed her mind.

The psalmist wants us to shout for joy. He wants us to give thanks with music. He wants us to sing sings and even make our own songs. Read the first 5 verses:

Shout for joy in the Lord, O you righteous!
Praise befits the upright.
Give thanks to the Lord with the lyre;
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings!
Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.
For the word of the Lord is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.
He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.
[Psalm 33 v 1-5]

I always picture David composing his songs while sitting under a tree with his harp, playing gentle melodies, comforting the sleepy sheep. But maybe some of his songs featured loud shouts. Maybe the shepherds on the others hills around Bethlehem could hear him shouting for joy in the Lord.

Now this isn't a call for false cheerfulness. It's not that we should put on a happy face despite how we're feeling. There are good reasons for being joyful. God's word is upright - that means we can trust what's written in it. His works are faithful, so we know we can rely on him to keep his promises. He loves righteousness. Sometimes it might seem that evil flourishes, but God favours those who follow him. And he also loves justice, There is a reward for righteousness and a punishment for evil. And look at that last line: "*the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.*" Isn't that something to be joyful about?

Stand in Awe

OK, so we need to power up our praise. But I think we need to enhance our eyesight as well. And for someone short sighted and colour blind, that's physically difficult. We can put on a spiritual pair of glasses though, and bring God's creation into better focus.

How do we do that. Just by taking the time to contemplate it.

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
and by the breath of his mouth all their host.
He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap;
he puts the deeps in storehouses.
Let all the earth fear the Lord;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.
[Psalm 33 v 6-9]

Do you ever look at the stars? It's best if you can find a dark, open place. The sky is so big. Bigger than we can imagine. We used to think all the stars were the same distance from us, bright dots of light on a black canvas. But in fact they're huge, each one a sun in its own right, and so much further away than we can grasp. It does us good to stand and consider them. And consider the God who created them.

Look down from the stars and we see the land and the sea. It's all from him. Now what do the words "*He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap*" makes us think about? Perhaps creation, when God separated the land from the water and made space for the seas. Perhaps when he

parted the Red Sea so that the Israelites could walk across. We can admire God's work in the natural and the supernatural.

Why should we contemplate creation? Because it helps us get a better vision of the creator God. It is by him that these things exist and it is by him that we exist.

Follow His Counsel

And the psalmist turns his gaze on humanity now. We've thought about improving our voice in praise, enhancing our eyes in gazing on his creation, and it's the turn of the legs now. You see our legs take us where we want, don't they? And that is often a problem. When we follow our own counsel, when we go our own way, it leads us into trouble.

The psalmist here wants us to follow God's way, to listen to his plans. And what's the result? Blessing.

The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.
The counsel of the Lord stands forever,
the plans of his heart to all generations.
Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!
[Psalm 33 v 10-12]

What does he mean when talks about a nation whose God is the Lord? Throughout history there have been countries that have been known as Christian nations. I think that certainly a nation that follows God's ways is going to do better spiritually than one that doesn't, but then again there are countries that claim to be Christian but don't show it so well.

Here, though, we're thinking about God's chosen people. In the Old Testament that's Israel. Today it's the Church. We are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. And our calling is to walk God's way.

Depend on Him

From legs we move to arms, but not the ones you're thinking of. Look at verses 13 to 17:

The Lord looks down from heaven;
he sees all the children of man;
from where he sits enthroned he looks out
on all the inhabitants of the earth,

he who fashions the hearts of them all
and observes all their deeds.
The king is not saved by his great army;
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.
The war horse is a false hope for salvation,
and by its great might it cannot rescue.
[Psalm 33 v 13-17]

Where do we put our trust? In our money? Our position? Our strength? A country or a king can have an army. A warrior has his strength, his training and his weapons. A war horse is even mightier than a soldier, and yet we would be fools if we think these things protect us. Our enemies may have bigger armies, stronger soldiers, tanks instead of horses.

But God sees. God knows. He made us, and he sees all we do. Why not trust in him? If there's one person we can be sure can overpower our enemies it is the Lord. And he often does so in unexpected ways. Remember when Elisha was at Dothan and the Syrian army had surrounded the city? God opened the eyes of his servant to see the mighty army of God that surrounded the Syrians. And yet that's not how God defeated them. Elisha prayed, and God blinded the Syrian soldiers. Elisha led them to the king and they were fed and sent away.

God is the one who can rescue. He is the one who can save. We can trust in him.

Hope in his Steadfast Love

And we can hope in him. This is the thing that makes us different. It's the thing that other people might see and ask questions about. Paul tells us always to be ready to give an explanation for the hope that is in us. And that's because it isn't a natural thing. It is born of the Spirit and evidence of the Spirit in us. Despite everything, despite the darkness around us, despite the suffering we go through, we hope in the Lord.

Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,
that he may deliver their soul from death
and keep them alive in famine.
[Psalm 33 v 18-19]

What has been the main thrust of technological advance over the last few thousand years? I'd argue that a large part of it is to prevent us starving to death. Crop rotation helped guard against the failure of one type of plant. Irrigation helped us keep crops growing well. Fertilisation helped them grow faster, pest control helped keep them from getting eaten away.

Mechanisation allowed us to grow more crops with less manpower. Genetic modification helped us increase the harvest. Climate control helped us give our crops the exact best conditions to grow well. International trade means we can import different foods that don't grow here and have access to foods all round the year.

There are still years when the crops fail. There are dry years, barren years. But we've put enough resilience in place to manage through these times. Food may be more expensive, but we get through.

There are spiritual hard times too. There are times when it seems that we have little to keep us going. And yet we have hope. We have hope in the Lord whose eye is upon us. We have hope in his steadfast love. We have hope that he will deliver our soul from death, that he keeps us alive during the famine.

If you know someone who is going through a spiritual dry spell encourage them to hope in the Lord.

Conclusion

So we have to:

- Shout for joy
- Stand in awe
- Follow faithfully
- Trust in his strength
- And hope in his steadfast love

If we can do these things it will definitely power up our walk with the Lord.

Maybe though you're thinking "David, I'm getting too old for this, I'm tired, I don't have the energy to up my game like this".

Let me encourage you with this wee story. One of my greatest achievements at our church was during our yearly trip down to Ayr. We go down to the front, have a picnic and play games, including some races for the kids. Then they had the "young men's race". It was that or the grandad's race, and I didn't have any grandchildren, so I thought I'll have a go. A 47 year old racing against 20 year olds. And I won!

So you're never too old to have a go. Maybe the psalmist says it better than me, though:

Our soul waits for the Lord;
he is our help and our shield.

For our heart is glad in him,
because we trust in his holy name.
Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us,
even as we hope in you.
[Psalm 33 v 20-22]