

“Powerful Precepts Forever”

Psalm III

¹Praise the LORD.
I will extol the LORD with all my heart
in the council of the upright and in the assembly.
²Great are the works of the LORD;
they are pondered by all who delight in them.
³Glorious and majestic are his deeds,
and his righteousness endures forever.
⁴He has caused his wonders to be remembered;
the LORD is gracious and compassionate.
⁵He provides food for those who fear him;
he remembers his covenant forever.
⁶He has shown his people the power of his works,
giving them the lands of other nations.
⁷The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.
⁸They are steadfast for ever and ever,
done in faithfulness and uprightness.
⁹He provided redemption for his people;
he ordained his covenant forever—
holy and awesome is his name.
¹⁰The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all who follow his precepts have good understanding.
To him belongs eternal praise.

[NIV]

HOPE
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I. Introduction

One of the things that so intrigues me about the mountains in Scotland, is the variety of shapes they come in. In most mountainous regions I have visited, all the mountains are the same basic shape; size being their main difference. But the mountains in Scotland have unique character. One looks like the Sphinx head-on; one looks like a rice-paddy coolie hat; one looks like a saw-tooth; one looks like a human tooth, and so on.

The Psalms are the same. Last week, for example, Ps110 looked like Gandalf's hat. The outer brim, v1-3 and 5-7, gently slopes outward, shading us with safety under the powerful Kingly office of Christ. In the middle though, v4, we see the steeper summit peak pointing up to Christ's Priestly office, covering our heads with His once-for-all sacrifice.

Psalm 111 is well modeled by a most distinctive mountain ridge in northwest Scotland named "Suilven." At one end is a lower summit, then there is a saddle that inclines upward, and finally a soaring summit, with a front face shaped like a colossal haystack hiding the rest of the mountain to those viewing end-on. I hope to climb Suilven one day, but in the meantime let us soar with the psalmist on one-eleven.

II. Lower Peak (1)

Tighten your bootlaces, because we go ballistic with this first outburst of praise. It wells up from the bottom of the psalmist's heart... in silence, in private... a little whisper stirring in deep contentment... "Hallelu... Yah." "Praise... the LORD." But his praise cannot remain there for long, and before he knows it he's climbing up the end of this mountain ridge to a peak where he just has to holler out, ¹"I will extol the LORD with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly!"

The private and pure religion in his soul cannot remain quiet and hidden within. He must join with those who know his joy—not know *of* his joy, but *know* his joy. For his heart is united with theirs in the love of the Lord. They are the upright ones—the ones who have had their sins cleansed away by the blood of the Lamb. They are the upright ones—the ones who have humbly and gladly received the perfect obedience of the Son of God to their account. They are the beloved of the Lord and the lovers of the Lord... the same Spirit of the Lord that unites them with Christ, unites them with one another *in* Him. To exalt, commend, and worship the Lord with his whole heart, the psalmist must worship the Lord together with those with whom his heart is inseparably braided.

This first and lower peak is a very pleasant place to be. When you are gathered with this assembly, you will enjoy a very sweet, heavenly harmony of praise. ^{Ps89.5}"The heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones." On this lower peak, you find yourself in an undisturbed harmony. ^{89.7}"In the council of the holy ones God is greatly feared; he is more awesome than all who surround him."

In the world, there is a cacophony of cries for "harmony" among nations and men. Ironically, the only place such harmony can be found is in the assembly of the holy ones, *set apart* as the council of the upright. Ironic, for the world's cacophony has only one note in common: a clamoring crescendo to silence the council of the upright. The harmony in the council of the upright is the undivided, unified extolling of the Lord with the whole heart. When all present are extolling One Lord without any competing heart-interests, harmony is inevitable. In the world, harmony is impossible.

III. Saddle Steadily Rising (2-8)

We cannot remain on this first peak for long. Peering along the spine of this mountain ridge, we see the primary peak which compels us to come. Together we descend into the saddle of the mountain, a lower ridge along the spine. Together we go, 'pondering the great works of the Lord, for we delight in them.'² In this world there is something strange about us trekkers. ^{Ps10.4}"In his pride the wicked does not seek him [same word for 'ponder']; in all his thoughts there is no room for God." In fact, ^{Ps14.2}"The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God." And Paul answers, ^{Ro3.10}"There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹there is no one who understands, no one who seeks [ponders] God."

Why, then, are you trekking with us? Are you pondering the great works of the Lord? Do you delight in the majesty of creation? Or are you bent on believing this is all a random cosmic disturbance irrationally evolving from chaos to order? Are you genuinely pondering the Lord? Do you *really* want to know what He wants you to be and to do? Careful how you answer! Even of Israel did God say, ^{Isa58.2}"Day after day they [ponder] seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways... They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them." Yet ³"...on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers."

If you are trekking with us, you did not bring yourself into the council of the upright. ^{Isa65.1}"I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not [ponder] me." Enjoy this company with humility, then, and be glad, for ^{Ps119.2}"Blessed are they who keep his statutes and [ponder him] with all their heart." Will you ponder His Word and his works? Will you share your "ponderings from the pew" for others to read on our website? Or do you not delight in His works?

Ponder as you wander... talk as you walk. Extol the Lord! ³"Glorious and majestic are his deeds, and his righteousness endures forever." Who is like Him, who spreads out the heavens with His hands and places the sun, moon, planets, and stars in their galactic orbits? Who can form these mountains and bound the seas? Who can shake these mountains and stir the seas as He sees fit? Who gives breath and life to all creatures, and the power of will to man whom God formed in His own image? Who overthrows nations in a day, sends pestilence and plague, preserves the just and the unjust according to His wise purpose?

Not only are His deeds great and mighty; they are *glorious* and *majestic* because they arise of an eternal righteousness. They proclaim the eternal rule of rightness that reveals the very nature of the Lord whom we praise. The glory and majesty of His deeds has never changed and never will. ^{Ps119.142}"Your righteousness is everlasting and your law is true." ^{103.17}"From everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children." This is true whether or not we can find in ourselves any sensible agreement, with how a deed that looks so like a frown can be so right.

Still we can extol the Lord as we steadily ascend the gentle incline of this mountain spine. Why? Because ⁴"He has caused his wonders to be remembered; the LORD is gracious and compassionate." We have gained altitude in our trek. Works of creation and general providence are glorious and majestic. But "wonders" is a word reserved for special works of deliverance, redemption, salvation. Works of special grace, special compassion that comes at a cost. Redemption at great price.

We sing with Moses after God delivered Israel through the Red Sea waters from the murderous Egyptians, ^{Ex15.11}"O LORD? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" We sing from our own soul as we remember that we once were lost but now are saved, were blind but now we see. Among the worst of sinners some of us were. But we

were washed, we were sanctified, we were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.^{1Co6.11} Wonder of wonders! Once bound in sin; now free from all condemnation.^{Ro8.1 Mic7.18} O, "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.¹⁹You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea."

This is a full day's climb, and we must keep our eye on the weather. Dark clouds appear and threaten to move toward us. Even in this assembly there is the temptation to feel alone and unprotected. The sides of this spine are steep. Will the Lord protect? Will the Lord provide? Will the Lord lighten our heart with some gladness? It is bleak where we stand, must keep moving... What's that ahead? Delight of delights... a patch full of juicy, sweet raspberries! Did not the Lord promise to "provide food for those who fear him?"^{v5}

For those who continue walking in His paths, has He ever let their soul languish in spiritual destitution beyond what they are able to bear? Would not the very memorizing and recalling of this psalm be the means of nourishment to you when you are under the darkness of depression? He remembers His covenant forever, and you need to remember this, when you are tempted to succumb to the sin of melancholy and despair.^{wlc105}

Has not Jesus borne in His own body and soul the extremity of loneliness, a loneliness that would utterly crush you and me? Was that not *your* loneliness and *mine* that He suffered? Was He not tempted with the sense of overwhelming futility as every last one of His disciples fled from Him... when His very purpose for coming to earth was to *build* His Kingdom and not to empty it?

The clouds seem to be held at bay as we press onward and upward. Our spirits are lifted as we consider His great Kingly office.⁶"He has shown his people the power of his works, giving them the lands of other nations." Watch your step! Slippery objection! Check your compass! Sneaky side-trail! Deceptive short-cut! "Come now, 'giving his people the lands of other nations' can hardly be considered faithful and just to those nations!" Sometimes when you find yourself bewildered or lost on a trek, it helps to retrace your steps back to where you last confidently had your bearings.

If you do that here, you'll find this clear. "The works of His hands are faithful and just." Now, go back: "giving His people the lands of other nations." You see? Everything God does arises out of who He is. He is faithful and just. So somehow—though it may not yet be clear to you—giving the lands of other nations to His people *must* be faithful and just. In fact, those nations were already dead in their enmity and hatred toward God. Furthermore, God who created the lands and the nations, long ago had promised that land to His people.

He is faithful to His word. The very angels in heaven sing this song of Moses and of the Lamb, and you will too:^{Rv15.3}"Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages.⁴Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy..."

We are getting close to where our trail along this mountain spine begins rising steeply to the summit. We have a good base for our ascent, but there is one more stretch here to finalize our preparation.⁷"The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy." Yes, the precepts of the Lord, the will of the Lord, the laws of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart.^{Ps19.8} You cannot climb this summit if you do not long for His precepts, if you would not have your life preserved in His righteousness.^{ps119.40} You have no liberty to climb, if you would not ponder God's precepts.^{119.45}

But if you do obey His laws, if you do love His precepts, you will find you have more understanding than those who have many more years than you.^{119,100,104} What shall we say of Jesus, who Himself^{Heb5.8} "learned obedience from what he suffered⁹ and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him¹⁰ and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek"? This summit stands before us *because* Jesus loved the law of the Lord and found all His precepts trustworthy.

God's Ten Commandments have never changed and they never will. His precepts⁸ "are steadfast for ever and ever, done in faithfulness and uprightness." Christ has done them in faithfulness and uprightness. There is not a precept that Jesus Christ has not done completely, in faithfulness and uprightness. Nor is there a punishment for your failure and rebellion and mine against God precepts, that Jesus has not suffered in faithfulness and uprightness for you and for me.

IV. Summit (9)

Ho! What is this? You suddenly find yourself looking around, blinking, astonished. What happened! How did we get up here? A moment ago, we were staring at the frightful climb ahead of us... but here we are suddenly standing atop the summit that soars above all the clouds! No treacherous scramble! No arduous ascent! No steep struggle for us!⁹ "He provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever—holy and awesome is his name."

This is no mountain we can climb. You must remember when the psalm was written... in the shadow of Mt Sinai yet in the view of Mt Moriah upon which sat Jerusalem. What, then, was the covenant He ordained forever? It is the covenant of grace—the relationship God established with His Son, and in Him with His people. Life for His people—life promised by God and purchased by His Son at the cost of His own on the cross.

The covenant of grace, revealed to Adam; again to Abraham and secured with an oath.^{heb6.17} The covenant of grace, the principal part of the Sinai transaction, "I AM the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt."^{Ex20.1} The CoG, wherein God promised to forgive our sins and iniquities,^{Ex34.7} to circumcise our hearts that we might love the Lord our God.^{Dt30.6} The CoG, in which the 10C's—God's precepts—serve us as a Rule of Life, but have no power left to condemn us since Christ has borne all our condemnation on the cross.

And yet... is there not something fearful in the words, "Holy and awesome is His name"? There is, for the psalmist writing in the shadow of Sinai. At Mt Sinai, amidst the fire and smoke and thunder and quake, the covenant of works was repeated and displayed, albeit subservient to the CoG. Obey to live; disobey and die. Why? Surely the CoW could not annul the salvation God already promised to His people by a Redeemer who for us would keep all God's precepts in faithfulness and uprightness!^{gal3.17}

No. We did not climb this mountain in our own strength. Israel could not even *touch* the mountain without being destroyed. God used the threat of the CoW to drive His people to cast themselves upon His mercy in the CoG. Christ obeyed and died, that we who disobeyed might live. He Himself has lifted us up, upon this summit of Suilven-like Psalm 111.

V. Face (10)

So we find ourselves upon the summit... and how shall we now live? Shall we descend again? No, we are united with this mountain, this Rock, who is Christ. Yes, this mountain, this kingdom has grown up and rules right in the midst of His enemies and ours.^{Ps110.2} This Suilven stands out from the countryside and looks very different, very unique. As the world views this mountain upon which we stand, it can only see the face. It does not see or know the praise, the

exultation in our hearts. It does not see the spine upon which we walked upright pondering the works of the Lord, nor does it know our delight in them.

The world recoils in repudiation and fear of God's enduring righteousness, and it cannot apprehend His wonders, His grace, His compassion. It does not want to remember His covenant, for the only covenant the world knows is that into which we are all born, whose only promise now is eternal wrath for sin. The world rails against God's sovereign prerogative and justice in blessing whom He has chosen with glorious inheritance and dominion.

But what then does the world see? Only the face of this mountain behind which the rest remains hidden. And that face is ¹⁰"The fear of the LORD [which] is the beginning of wisdom." The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, for wisdom is to believe and obey... *in that order*. Foolishness is to think you can obey or satisfy God without believing in His redemption. To think you can satisfy God without the Redeemer Jesus Christ, shows the saddest of all arrogance. It denies God's Word wherein He plainly tells us the impossibility of pleasing Him by earning His pleasure... and worse—it rejects the gracious and compassionate redemption He's purchased by the blood of His Son. It is to be like the rebellious Jews who had ^{Jer2.13}"forsaken [God], the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water."

Still, this psalm reveals the effectiveness of the Mosaic administration of the CoG upon believers. God used awe and fear inspired by the Law of Works, as a means to lift souls into understanding, wisdom, whole-hearted exultation, and praise. How much better, now that Christ has written His precepts upon our hearts rather than stone. How much better, Christ having fulfilled the CoW for us, so no need to append it to the CoG to instill fear.

This psalm has a built-in memory device; it was made to be memorized. The 1st letter of each line is the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. That does not mean you need to memorize it in Hebrew. But again I ask, do you think this would be a good psalm to have in your memory, if you were in a jail cell for not praying toward Mecca at the appointed hour 5x per day? Or if your own government accused and imprisoned you for "hate-speech" in its clamor to silence the council of the upright? Do you think this would be a good psalm to have in your memory, on the days you are in a jail cell of despond and self-pity? Do you think Jesus had this psalm in His memory as He hung bleeding and abandoned on the cross? Yes! And ¹⁰"All who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise. Amen.