

“Powerful Presence Forever”

Psalm 114

¹When Israel came out of Egypt,
the house of Jacob from a people of foreign tongue,

²Judah became God’s sanctuary,
Israel his dominion.

³The sea looked and fled,
the Jordan turned back;

⁴the mountains skipped like rams,
the hills like lambs.

⁵Why was it, O sea, that you fled,
O Jordan, that you turned back,

⁶you mountains, that you skipped like rams,
you hills, like lambs?

⁷Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord,
at the presence of the God of Jacob,

⁸who turned the rock into a pool,
the hard rock into springs of water.

[NIV]

HOPE
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Rev. Chris Robinson

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I. Hearing

"Fear tells me when I am most alive," says a climber in Mt. Washington's Huntington Ravine who knows what a small slip of finger or toe can mean. Do you know what it feels like to be alive? Do you sense that this psalmist knows what it feels like to be alive? My guess is, he never climbed Huntington Ravine. But he does know what it would mean, if it were possible, to slip out of the grip of the Lord. He does know what it means to fear the Lord—to follow the Lord's precepts with great delight in his commands. And he does know what it means to praise the Lord. Yes, this psalmist does know what it feels like to be alive.

"He has caused his wonders to be remembered; the LORD is gracious and compassionate." So sang the writer of Psalm 111 as he praised the Lord with all his heart. Now, this little Psalm 114 marvelously captures the span of wonders—of redeeming works—revealing God's grace and compassion. This little Psalm 114 is bursting with life. Somehow, it captures the breadth of emotions that saints have the capacity to experience. It captures the entire existence of those who know the Lord as a Person.

This psalm majestically moves from great to intimate, from macro to micro, from light in the universe to delight in the soul. It moves from strangers to friends, it converses with excitable elements, and it shows how fear can be fulfilling.

II. Strangers and Friends

The psalmist first exults in the transition from strangers to friends. ¹"When Israel came out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of foreign tongue, ²Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion." Though the Hebrews living in Egypt had at first been gratefully appreciated, they became more and more strangers in a strange land. No longer were they known as the relatives of the man named Joseph who had saved the Egyptians from famine and starvation.

They were by now imposters in the land. They worshipped a God the Egyptians did not know. They had kept to themselves and minimized contact with the nationals. They made good slaves, and there wasn't much they could do about it. They were slaves stuck in a land strange if not barbarous. Their distant ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had trusted in a God who now seemed distant himself.

Do you ever wonder what it feels like to be dead? Does this sound like dead? ^{Ps22.1}"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? ²O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent."

Or this? ^{Job3.3}"May the day of my birth perish, and the night it was said, 'A boy is born!' ⁴That day—may it turn to darkness; may God above not care about it; may no light shine upon it."

Or this? ^{Ps89.46}"How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire? ⁴⁷Remember how fleeting is my life. For what futility you have created all men! ⁴⁸What man can live and not see death, or save himself from the power of the grave?"

Or this? ^{Ps22.11}"Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help. ¹²Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. ¹³Roaring lions tearing their prey open their mouths wide against me. ¹⁴I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. ¹⁵My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death."

Being far from God—or at least far from God's gracious and compassionate smile—is what it feels like to be dead. Do you know what it feels like to be dead? No friends. No future. No favor. No God. All were very far away. Israel felt dead in Egypt.

Then God came near. God came near and raised Israel up from the dead. God came near and brought Israel up out of Egypt, out of slavery, out of strangeness. God came near. God came *very* near. Said he, ^{Ex29.45}"I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. ⁴⁶They will know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of Egypt so that I *might dwell* among them. I AM the LORD their God."

God came near. ^{114.2}"Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion." God came very near. He came to live with, among, and within the Jewish people. Judah, that prominent part of the peoples through whom the Redeemer would come, represents all Israel as God's sanctuary, God's holy place, God's house, God's kingdom. Israel is God's dominion; set free from friendlessness. Free from aloneness.

Israel is God's holy place; set free to be near him and free to fear him. Free to be loved by him and free to love him. Free to follow his precepts with great delight in his commands. Free to be set apart *for* God. Free to be the unique place everywhere and the right time always for God to *dwell*.

God came near. God was not a set of ideas. God was not a common cause that could unite like-minded people. God was not a belief. God was not even faith. God was—and is—a Person. God in the Person of the Son, Jesus Christ, comes near. He is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. He is going to come near. Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. ^{Act10.42f}

When God comes near in the Person of the Son, will he judge you—vindicate you—as among the living? Or will he judge you—condemn you—as among the dead because you did not believe in him? A set of ideas cannot judge you because you don't accept them. "All that stuff" people believe cannot judge you because you don't buy into it. A common cause to better mankind cannot judge you because you don't throw in your lot with it. Your faith cannot judge you because you believe in yourself instead. None of these are appointed to judge you.

Jesus Christ alone is appointed to judge you. Have you cast yourself upon his mercy so that when he comes near he will forgive you? Or have you snubbed his offer of lovingkindness because you don't want to believe in all that stuff? It's not the 'stuff' that will kill you. It is the God of heaven and earth. Neither is it the 'stuff' that can save you. It is the God of heaven and earth. Receive his love... he earned it with his own blood on the cross. Praise his name... he deserves it according to his eternal holiness. Plead with him to come near with forgiveness.

III. Excitable Elements

What happens, second, when God comes near? The elements get excited. ³"The sea looked and fled, the Jordan turned back; ⁴the mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs." I think it might help those who don't believe in God, if they asked the seas, rivers, and mountains why they do the things they do. If you think the universe is a bunch of statistical chance, luck, or fortune, it may serve you well to ask the seas, rivers, and mountains why they do the things they do. If you think mountains just happened to form, seas just happened to be bounded, or animals just happened to evolve, you might find it instructive to ask the seas, rivers, and mountains why they do the things they do.

When God came near to bring Israel out of Egypt, the Red Sea fled from him. ^{Ps104.7}"At your rebuke the waters fled, at the sound of your thunder they took to flight." Or as Moses sang,

Ex15.8⁸“By the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up. The surging waters stood firm like a wall; the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea.”

When God was near to bring Israel into the land of Canaan which He had promised the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Jordan River turned back from him. Jos3.15¹⁵“Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, ¹⁶the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (the Salt Sea) was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho.”

The elements get excited when God comes near! Mic1.4⁴“The mountains melt beneath him and the valleys split apart, like wax before the fire, like water rushing down a slope.” Nah1.5⁵“The mountains quake before him and the hills melt away. The earth trembles at his presence, the world and all who live in it.” When God came near to dwell among the Israelites, Ex19.18¹⁸“Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently. The elements get excited when God comes near! Do *you*?

There are some sights that God must have calculated just to make people giggle. Hopping lambs and skipping rams are among such sights. Few things are as delightfully silly as seeing cute little lambs hopping. You look at a pasture with sheep and their lambs, and for no apparent reason, the lambs just start hopping! Gotta hop! Gotta skip! They don't look agitated; they just gotta hop. It's worth flying to Scotland just to see them!

Not quite so cute to see hills hopping. Not quite so cute to see an earthquake level city blocks. Not quite so cute to see a volcano incinerate a town. Not quite so cute to see a landslide swallow up homes. Not quite so cute to see an avalanche entomb a village. Why, then, does the psalmist use such imagery as cute hopping lambs for devastating colossal disasters?

It is because when God comes near, the biggest and oldest of mountains are no more stable than the cutest and youngest of lambs. In the Apocalypse John reports, Rev20.11¹¹“I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.” So you think the rocks in Huntington Ravine are of more value than human souls, because they've been around longer and probably will be?

What will you say when you, like John, see ¹²“the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. ¹³The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. ¹⁴Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. ¹⁵If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” Now, do you think that lake of fire isn't trembling as it swallows souls who preferred to receive its torture rather than trust in the Lord's mercy?

Listen, a set of ideas cannot cause the sea to flee, the Jordan to turn back, or mountains and hills to skip like rams and lambs. “All that stuff” people believe cannot cause the sea to flee, the Jordan to turn back, or mountains and hills to skip like rams and lambs. A common cause to better mankind cannot cause the sea to flee, the Jordan to turn back, or mountains and hills to skip like rams and lambs. Your faith cannot cause the sea to flee, the Jordan to turn back, or mountains and hills to skip like rams and lambs.

Jesus Christ, the second person of the Godhead, has been given all power and authority in heaven and on earth. He can cause the sea to flee, the Jordan to turn back, or mountains and hills to skip like rams and lambs. He can cause devils to flee, and he will cause the troublers of his bride, the Church, to be cast away from her forever and ever. It won't be a cute picture, but it will be deeply gratifying to those who follow His precepts with great delight in his commands.

IV. Fear and Filling

A. Command to Fear

Finally, fear and filling complete the psalmist's description of existence for those who know the Lord as a Person. Here is a command to creation, and a reminder of God's grace and compassion. Firstly the command to creation: ⁷"Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob."

Astonishing is the arrogant stand of one who will do less than the majestic mountains, the globe-spanning seas, and the rushing rivers, before the presence of the Lord! Mountains, seas, and rivers do not need to be told to tremble when the Lord is present. Far more intelligent are those lifeless rocks and formless waters that tremble before the Lord, than the self-congratulating intellectual who thinks he can outwit his Creator! Far more sensible are the cold, hard, crags of Huntington Ravine, than the cleverest climber who thinks she can get along just fine without a God who doesn't even exist!

No, the command is not for the rocks of the ravine or the rivers of the valley. The command to tremble is for all flesh made in the image of God, who came in the flesh to deliver all peoples from the strange dominion of sin. ^{Jer5.22}"Should you not fear me?" declares the LORD. 'Should you not tremble in my presence?'"

The command to tremble is for all peoples, for the Rock of our Salvation can turn the cold stones that we call our hearts into true and living hearts of flesh. If the One who is appointed to judge you was not offering His loving mercy freely to you, he would not have issued this command in a way you could hear it. Tremble at his presence, and receive his everlasting love! ^{Ps96.9}"Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth."

B. Reminder of Filling

But how did he love you, who feel dead whether you know it or not, because he seems so distant? This is how: he came near. He is the rock who followed Israel through the wilderness. ^{1Co10.1}"For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. ²They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. ³They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ."

He is the rock who came near, in order that he might be struck with Moses' rod of judgment. ^{Exo17.1-6} He is the rock who came near, so that he might pour out the living water of life to you, who will lay your polluted corruption of sins upon Jesus. He is the rock of our salvation who pours out his Holy Spirit into the hearts of those who believe in Him, and receive forgiveness of sins through his name.

A set of ideas cannot fill you. "All that stuff" people believe cannot fill you. A common cause to better mankind cannot fill you. Your faith cannot fill you. None of those are appointed to fill you. The Person of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ alone can fill you. And when he does fill you, you will tremble in his presence, and your heart will hop and skip in his love.

When the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ is in you, your sins—and they are *all* deadly—must be removed as far from you as the east is from the west.

When the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ is in you, his perfect and complete obedience to all the Lord's precepts must be covering you.

When the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ is in you, great delight in his commands must be making your heart hop.

Do you know what it feels like to be alive? Trembling, hopping, and skipping because the God of Jacob is dwelling within you as his sanctuary... that is what it feels like to be alive.