

## 9.1.24

## The Earth is Full of God's Steadfast Love

## Psalm 33

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I suspect that like me, you listen to different kinds of music depending on what you're doing or how you're feeling. For example. I listen to one kind of music when I'm working out and another when I'm writing or driving. You may listen to one type of music when you're feeling reflective or sad and another genre when you're happy.

In the Hebrew language the psalms are called *tehillim*, which means **“songs of praise,”** but not all the psalms are songs of praise. There's a variety of types of Psalms in the Bible which is helpful when we're in different emotional states or at different times in life. The psalms include **Individual Laments** like Psalm 31 (Psalms 3, 13, 22, 42, 43); **Community Laments** (Psalms 44, 74, 79), **Wisdom Psalms** (Psalms 1, 37, 49, 73, 112), **Psalms of Trust** (Psalms 4, 11, 16, 23, 27, 131), **Enthronement Psalms** that celebrate God's kingship and sovereignty over all creation. (They're found in Book IV of the Psalter and include Psalms 47, 93, 96-99), **Royal Psalms** (which focus on the role of kings and their relationship to God - Psalms 2, 18, 20, 110), **Individual songs of thanksgiving** (Psalms 30, 32, Psalm 34), and **Praise Hymns** such as **Psalm 33** which we're hearing today (Psalms 8, 19, 33, 100).

The number of psalms of praise is second only to the number of psalms of lament so the first thing I invite you to remember today is **The Importance of Praise.** Praise is at the heart of the life of the people of God as individuals and as a worshipping community. Praise is our natural response of gratitude and appreciation. It's also important in times of hardship because it helps us work to find things for which we can still be thankful. **The word “praise” appears more times in the Psalms than in any other book of the Bible. There are at least 14 psalms of praise, and the word “praise” occurs in 41 of the 150 Psalms in the Bible.**

The difference between **a song of thanksgiving** and **a hymn of praise** like **Psalm 33** is that a thanksgiving is specific and personal while **a hymn praises God in general terms, exalting God who is upright, faithful, just, righteous, loving, the creator of all. Psalm 33** is one of **seven Hymns to the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe** (Psalms 33, 103, 113, 117, 145, 146, 147). **Psalm 33** is also the first psalm

**to mention the use of musical instruments in worshiping God**, which is why its opening verses are so fitting to begin a worship service as we did today.

The first three verses of Psalm 33 highlight **the importance of praise** and **call us to worship and praise God** with stringed instruments and shouts of praise. This is loud, it's not silence nor quiet reverence – there's a time for both in the psalms and in our worship. We're told to sing **a new song** because it's important not just to remember what God did in the past, but to name, identify, and praise God for what the Lord is doing in the present as well. Writing, composing, and singing new songs enables us to tell the ongoing story of God's active presence with us which communicates that God didn't just act in the ancient past, but God is still with us today.

After beginning with an invitation to praise, rejoice, and sing, Psalm 33 describes the God who is worthy of our praise. **Psalm 33:4-9**, “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**. **By the word of the LORD the heavens were made**, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put 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.”

When I was a little boy, the prayer that was said at our dinner table most frequently, began with the words, “*God is great, God is good, and we thank him for our food.*” This simple prayer summarizes the pattern of the psalms of praise in the Bible: it expresses *praise and thanks* and gives two *reasons* for praise and thanks: **God's greatness and God's goodness**.

Psalm 33:4 tells us about **The Character of God** who is great and good and worthy of our worship and praise, “*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.*” Those five terms are among the most-used words in the Bible to describe the way of the Lord. **upright, faithfulness, righteousness, justice, steadfast love** – these are the characteristics of a great and good God we can

**trust.** A God who is with us even in moments of suffering, pain, grief, and loss, which many of our families are experiencing.

Consider each of these characteristics of God for a moment. *“The word of the Lord is **upright**.”* **God’s word is true and dependable.** We can trust what God tells us and that enables us to have a healthy relationship with God. If someone’s word is not true but false or characterized by lies, then we can’t trust that person, and we can’t have a healthy relationship with them. It’s not wise to trust or place your confidence in someone whose word is not true and dependable. We also don’t want to be a person whose word is not true and dependable. God’s word is trustworthy, and our words should be too. Jesus says in **Matthew 5:37** about truthfulness and being straightforward in our speech, *“But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.”*

Not only is the word of the Lord upright, true, and dependable, all God’s work is done in **faithfulness. God is faithful.** When a couple is getting married, if they say a variation of traditional wedding vows, each person pledges to be faithful to one another as long as they both shall live. Pledging our faithfulness to our spouse and proving faithful creates a relationship of safety and trust in which both individuals can thrive and flourish. Where there is unfaithfulness, there is pain, hurt, misunderstanding, and a violation of trust that’s difficult to overcome and takes time to rebuild. The psalm says, *“all God’s work is done in faithfulness.”* God is faithful.

Next, we’re told in verse 4 that **“God loves righteousness and justice.”** Whatever God loves, we should too. In the Bible, righteousness is living in a right relationship with God, other people, and all creation. It’s also described as living justly, honestly, and faithfully in accordance with God’s instructions. This is the type of life we’re invited and called to live. When we embody and advocate for righteousness and justice, we honor God and help lead others to believe. When we fail to embody and advocate for righteousness and justice, we dishonor God and turn people away from the Lord. That may sound a bit harsh, but that’s what happens. When the prophet Micah was summing up the Lord’s requirements of people, Micah said (6:8 ESV), *“and what does the Lord require of you **but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?**”*

God is upright and faithful, loves righteousness and justice, and perhaps best of all, *“the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.”* The Hebrew word “hesed” appears more than 250 times in the Hebrew Bible and means steadfast love, or loving kindness. It’s used in Psalm 33 to describe God’s care for people and in other passages, in human relationships, hesed implies loving our neighbor through acts of love and service.

Think about how everything Psalm 33 says about God, is revealed and demonstrated in the life of Jesus. Jesus’ words were upright, all Jesus did was done in faithfulness, Jesus loved righteousness and justice and modeled them for his followers, for the crowds that flocked to him, and even to his critics, opponents, and enemies. Jesus was the living incarnation of the loving kindness and steadfast love of the Lord. Jesus said those who heard his words and obeyed them would be like a wise man who built his house upon a rock. That house would have a good foundation that would withstand the storms of life.

Psalm 33 invites us to answer the question, ***“Where do I place my ultimate trust and hope?”*** My ultimate hope is in the Lord who is worthy of praise, whose character is unsurpassed, who is the **creator of the heavens and the earth, who rules over the nations, over human beings, and is the God of salvation.**

Originally published in 1952 just a few years after the end of World War Two, *Waiting for Godot* is a play by Irish playwright Samuel Beckett. It follows two days in the lives of a pair of men who seek to pass the time while they wait expectantly and unsuccessfully for someone named Godot to arrive. They claim him as an acquaintance but in fact hardly know him, admitting that they wouldn’t recognize him were they to see him. To occupy themselves, they eat, sleep, converse, argue, sing, play games, exercise, swap hats, and contemplate suicide — anything *“to hold the terrible silence at bay”*.

Vladimir and Estragon discuss repentance, in relation to the two thieves crucified alongside Jesus, and that only one of the Four Evangelists mentions that one of them was saved. This is the first of numerous Biblical references in the play, the central theme of which is the search for hope and meaning, questioning whether there is any, and the possibility of reconciliation with God, as well as salvation. They cry, **“We’re**

**saved!"** on more than one occasion when they feel that Godot may be near, only to be disappointed.

Sadly, there are some people like Vladimir and Estragon who claim God as an acquaintance, but in fact hardly know him, and wouldn't recognize the Lord if he were to show up in their lives. They don't grasp the importance of praise. They can't describe nor do they appreciate the character of God who is upright and faithful, who loves justice and righteousness, who fills the earth with steadfast love. They don't pursue or strive to live out those godly virtues themselves. They don't know the God who spoke creation into being, who rules over nations, yet sees and knows each of us individually. A God more powerful than any earthly ruler or army or implement of war, the only one who can save us and truly bring us eternal salvation.

In Psalm 33:13-15, we're told, "***The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind... he watches all the inhabitants of the earth...and observes all their deeds.***" God sees every person, and this communicates accountability, comfort, and warning. Who we are and what we do is known to the Lord. The accountability and warning piece is that we may delude ourselves or fool other people about who we are, but God knows the truth about us, so we're to live mindful of that fact. The comfort is that when we're hurting, struggling, lonely, grieving, or overwhelmed, God sees us and doesn't leave us alone.

We can see God's steadfast love in the blessings God gives us. From the beauty of the world to the people in our lives, God is constantly giving us gifts large and small because God loves us. We often experience God's love through our interactions with other people. Through small everyday acts of kindness like Micah mentions, we share God's steadfast love with others, and others share it with us. A kind word, a small deed or expression, these all make a difference. Everyone one of us who is already a follower of Christ is either helping to draw people closer to God or pushing them further away by what we say and do every day. I don't care if someone rejects me because I trust and serve Jesus, but I don't want someone to reject Jesus because of me. The earth is full of God's steadfast love, how can you and I help share and spread that love? Be kind. Be hospitable. Be a listener. Be honest. Be in prayer. Be intentional.

The psalms teach us about God's character and qualities so that we can know God better and see the Lord at work in the world and in our lives. **The God we trust and hope in is upright, faithful, righteous, just, full of steadfast love, the creator of the universe, ruler of nations, and yet sees each of us individually.**

Psalm 33 is a psalm of praise that asks you and me, *"Who are you waiting for? Where are you placing your trust?"* The psalm wants us to join in praising God and saying as God's people have for centuries,

***"My soul waits for the Lord; he is my help and shield.***

***My heart is glad in him, because I trust in his holy name.***

***Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon me, even as I hope in you."***

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. Psalm 33 is a hymn of praise that begins with a call to worship the Lord. How are God's people called to rejoice in and praise the Lord in verses 1-3? What would it sound like to do what verses 1-3 describe?
2. Why is taking time regularly to worship God important for us individually and as a congregation? What difference does it make for you? For all of us?
3. What do we learn about the character of God in Psalm 33:4-6? What attributes are listed that illuminate who God is and how God acts? Is there one aspect of God's character that especially speaks to you today?
4. Psalm 33:5 asserts that *"the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord."* What evidence would you give to support that statement to someone who doesn't yet trust God?
5. Psalm 33:18-22 is a statement of faith, hope, and trust even in the face of life's bitterest realities such as conflicts among nations, famine, and death. Is it possible to praise, hope and trust in God, even when our life experience is not what we hoped for either for ourselves or our loved ones? How do we do that?
6. The two biggest categories of Psalms are laments followed by hymns of praise. What does this teach us about how we are to pray and to worship the Lord?