

God, Cosmos, Grace and Thanksgiving

From the sermon series on the Cosmos

Text: I Chronicles 29: 11-13; Ephesians 1: 4-6, 9

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

And now we thank thee, our God, and praise thy glorious name.

I Chronicles 29: 11-13

In Christ he chose us before the world was founded.... Determined beforehand in Christ – to be put into effect when the time was ripe; namely, that the universe, all in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ.

Ephesians 1: 4-6, 9

Worship is the ascription of *worth* to God; it arises from a sense of awe before the majesty and marvel of who He is. It arises, that is, it is a spontaneous, irrepressible expression of praise and adoration.

Gratitude is likewise a spontaneous feeling that wells up in the human heart in the wake of the recognition of some grace or mercy or kindness done, some blessing received. We teach our children to say "Thank you" but we cannot teach nor can we coerce gratitude. How often do we not say of some person helped who fails to express gratitude, "What an ingrate!" But if it is not felt, then it cannot be forced.

In this marvelous and moving outpouring of thanksgiving and praise of David in I Chronicles, we sense the essence of worship and gratitude - *a heart totally transfixed in the presence of the grace of God*. Let me tell you briefly about the situation that called forth this eloquent expression of praise and thanksgiving.

Having consolidated his throne and expanded and secured Israel's borders, David wanted to build a great temple for the worship of God in Jerusalem. However, according to the prophet's word, that task would be denied David; it was rather to be his son, Solomon, who would build the temple. David yielded to that prophetic word, but he nonetheless made preparations for the building and used his power and persuasion with the people to gather gifts and resources with which to build.

The occasion of our text is the great service of thanksgiving at the ingathering of the gifts of the respective tribes. A great outpouring of generosity to make the temple project possible was celebrated in a service of thanksgiving which was led by David, the King. The majestic doxological prayer, which is our text, is David's expression of the gratitude and praise he felt to God Who had moved the hearts of the people to support so generously the temple offering. David can hardly find words adequate to ascribe to God the worthiness of His grace.

...Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and thou art exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from thee, and thou rulest over all. In thy hand are power and might; and in thy hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank thee, our God, and praise thy glorious name. I Chronicles 29: 11-13

The deep emotion surges through that ascription of praise. We still "feel" it. It poured out. And true worship, praise and thanksgiving are the irrepressible expressions of a heart touched by mercy, overwhelmed by grace, subdued by love. True worship has the note of doxology and doxology cannot be coerced or conjured up. It arises.

Doxology was a hallmark of Paul's worship. The burning passion of that great apostle was the consequence of a grand vision of the Truth. Paul's vision of God was no narrow understanding of some local, tribal deity, but rather of the Eternal God Who from eternity had a plan of cosmic scope to bind together all things into a glorious harmony and the very heart of that eternal purpose was *grace*.

Like David, Paul can hardly find words adequately to express the grandeur and scope of the grace of God at work in the world, culminating in the grace that appeared in Jesus who is the very center of this vast cosmic drama.

Listen to his outpouring of this cosmic vision:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ...For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. Ephesians 1: 3-6, 9

In this series of messages, I have been attempting to sketch the amazing dimensions of the universe of which we are a part. To catch even a fleeting

glimpse, to gain even a faint impression of the wonders of the natural world is to stand in awe.

And this I have tried to say to you – that the power and might and majesty of the Creation can be seen in another realm, the realm of His gracious reaching of us, creatures of His making, created to reflect His image, to live in communion with Him and one another.

The God of Cosmos is the God of Grace. Our Creator is Our Saviour.

As we reflect on the first chapter of Ephesians, we can sense the excitement of this insight into God's cosmic plan of salvation. Paul had received the revelation of God's gracious plan as we saw in the previous message. God had acted in Jesus to bring to the world the knowledge of Himself and in Jesus, to accomplish the salvation of the whole world. If we read the various letters of Paul, we know that salvation for him involved nature and people - the whole cosmos. It was this amazing revelation that Paul could hardly fathom, before which he bowed in adoring praise. Worship, praise and thanksgiving arose from the depths of his being.

God had a plan.

Before the foundation of the world He loved us and included us in His gracious purpose of love. When the time was ripe, He unveiled His hidden purpose that the universe, all in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ. Mindboggling, is it not! It was to Paul. He broke out in doxology.

David and Paul both understood the grandeur and the wonder of God's gracious purpose. They knew God's grace was as expansive as the Cosmos and as personal as the individual person touched by grace. Grace is the secret of the universe - the world of nature. Grace is the secret of our human existence. Grace is the ultimate ground and cause of praise and thanksgiving.

The Hamburg Times, dated October 9, 1981, has an extended article telling of a conference sponsored by the Thyssen Foundation. The purpose of this conference of scientists was to explore the "Anthropic Principle" - looking at the universe from the perspective of humankind. The amazing result was the realization that this whole cosmological process of billions of years is delicately balanced to provide at this point in the cosmic drama the presence of persons able to know who they are, know the history of the cosmos and assume responsibility for its future.

Taking all the data available to us today through the research of the natural sciences, this convention of scientists discovered the universe to be delicately balanced, finely tuned in order to provide an environment in which life such as ours is possible.

Were the speed of expansion greater than it is, our universe would not have formed as it has. Were the force of gravity less or greater, our universe would not have formed as it has.

The author of the article, "The World Is As It Is," Reinhard Breuer, at the Max Planck Institute for Plasma Physics at Garching, Bavaria, concludes by declaring,

The interplay of exactly four forces seems, thus shows the anthropic principle, to have been already a quite frugal method for making possible an evolution through diversity and selection. The structure of the cosmos through natural laws as well as also a special process of evolution evidently cooperated effectively in an almost unique manner within the network of relative relations of forces in order to bring forth an intelligent civilization - us. The American physicist Freeman Dyson once said: "If we look out into the universe and recognize how many chance occurrences worked together for our benefit, then it almost seems as if the universe had known in a certain sense that we were coming."

The anthropic principle thus permits a new and uniform valuation of the seemingly (at least in part) accidental development of the world and of the role of man in it. This indeed does not yet make possible an "explanation" in the sense of a scientific theory. Until today it has been shown that terrestrial life is most closely anchored in this structure, that our roots reach back all the way into the properties of the big bang. This transparence doubtlessly orients itself by the example of terrestrial life; it remains open whether an alternate cosmos could be populated by an entirely different form of intelligence.

The new mode of thought underpins at any rate the thesis that the world is as it is because with any other constellation of natural laws we would not be here at all. To talk of an "accident" or of "chance" as the cause of our existence is therefore meaningless.

Carl Sagan is fully aware of all the data of which these scientists were aware. He looks at it and is enthralled by it, but ascribes it all to chance, accident, coincidence. You and I look at it and fall to our knees as we begin to sense the *Grace-Structure* of the Cosmos. And with Paul we do more. We see in the vast Grace-Structured Cosmos a point in time - when the time was ripe -when one appeared whose name was Jesus, in whose face we see reflected the image of God Who is first and last the God of Grace.

Could it be that this vast cosmic drama involving such immensity of space, billions and billions of years, could have been effected and set in motion for the purpose of love being shared, community being formed, community of God and humankind? That would seem to be the case.

What does that do for us? It certainly is no cause for boasting and pride. Are we not rather overwhelmed? Do we not identify with David, who in the ecstasy of experiencing the grace of God, cried out....

But what am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to give willingly like this? For everything comes from thee, and it is only of thy gifts that we give to thee. I Chronicles 29: 14

What am I? I am known and loved of God!

O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!

Grace is the ultimate truth, the final reality. Whether we search the distant stars or probe the mysteries of the minute atom, it is grace that meets us. Thanksgiving and praise arise from a heart transfixed by the grace of God.

It is good in the Season of Thanksgiving to count our blessings, to take stock of our situation. Yet the immediate circumstances of our lives may not cause praise and thanksgiving to arise spontaneously. Perhaps our situation presently is one of adversity. Can we still give thanks?

Certainly we can if we take the broad view, if we catch the vision of the cosmic grandeur of the Divine Purpose. In the long view, our immediate circumstances lose their urgency. In the light of the "big picture", we cannot but stand in awe before Grace.

Grace is the ground of thanksgiving. Grace, as broad as the Cosmos, as personal as our names, engraven on the palms of His hands, is the first and last word.

...Blessed art thou, O Lord, the God of Israel our father, for ever and ever. Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and thou art exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from thee, and thou rulest over all. In thy hand are power and might; and in thy hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank thee, our God, and praise thy glorious name. I Chronicles 29:10-13

Amen.