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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## My Favorite Psalm

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SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ MARCH 3, 2019

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**M**ake a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!  
<sup>2</sup> Serve the LORD with gladness!  
Come into his presence with singing!

<sup>3</sup> Know that the LORD, he is God!  
It is he who made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

<sup>4</sup> Enter his gates with thanksgiving,  
and his courts with praise!  
Give thanks to him; bless his name!

<sup>5</sup> For the LORD is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever,  
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Psalm 100 (ESV)

When I was little boy, I attended the elementary Sunday school class of Richmond Heights Presbyterian Church. I don't remember much about that class, but I vividly remember a flipchart that was in the front of the room. It was on that flipchart that my teachers, Mrs. Mauer and Mrs. Clark, put passages of Scripture for us to memorize. I remember that the very first one they put there was Psalm 100, which ended up being the very first passage of Scripture that I memorized as a young child. This psalm has become the basis of my spiritual life. I'm not sure if it was because this was the first passage I memorized so it has had a profound impact on me throughout my life or if perhaps it was providentially the first Scripture that I memorized. I now resonate with that psalm and through it the Lord has

worked in my heart, brought me to faith and matured my faith. It has become my favorite psalm.

What does it say? Let's dive right in and see what the psalmist has for us. It begins with the very familiar phrase, "Make a joyful noise to the LORD." In this case the word "noise" does not just mean to make a racket; it is not noise in that sense. What it is referring to is actually vocalizing our joyful sounds to the Lord. In fact, some Bible translations say, "shout joyfully to the LORD."

When I hear that phrase, I remember certain scenes from my own life. One in particular is as a teenager going, as I often did, to a St. Louis Cardinals baseball game. That afternoon early in the game the Cardinals found themselves behind 10-2. As the game progressed and we got closer and closer to the final innings, they had managed to work their way back, getting closer and closer until the bottom of the ninth inning when they were behind 13-11. Obviously, it was a defensive struggle and a pitcher's duel! Then, as if it were right out of a Hollywood script with a storybook finish, with two outs in the bottom of the ninth inning and the bases loaded, one of my favorite players, Willie McGee, stepped up to the plate. When we heard the crack of the bat it was clear that Willie had hit a grand slam homerun to win the game. The Cardinals won 15-13. There was a huge crowd. The St. Louis stadium was at capacity on that Wednesday night in the middle of July as 48,000 people all rose at once. I have never heard more noise in my life! The cheering, the clapping, the high-fives with hands in the air was the biggest sound I have ever heard, and I teased people that for two days I could not hear because there had been so much noise in the stadium.

Perhaps you have experienced something like that. Maybe it was another sporting event that you remember or a concert or an inspiring speech that really brought your emotions to a high point. Maybe right here in the sanctuary there have been times when our choir has so inspired you that it has been one of those "mountaintop" experiences and you just had to unleash the energy and the excitement of

what you had experienced. That is exactly the spirit that the psalmist is trying to communicate here.

Understanding his meaning provides us an opportunity to do a little soul-searching. Do we have that much excitement for the Lord? Hopefully our excitement is more than for sports teams, for concerts, for political speeches or for whatever in our daily lives takes us to that mountaintop. Does the One who changed your eternity inspire that much passion? That much excitement? That much enthusiasm?

I'm not suggesting that we all need to yell in church, but the question is: What is burning in your heart? Do you realize that Jesus conquered sin? It is something that we could not do ourselves, something that separated us from our Creator. He has conquered death itself; He is the Lord of the universe! He is the One who promised to be with you to the close of the age. Does that inspire in you the same measure of excitement as a mere moment in a game?

If we do not fully grasp and understand what it is that Jesus did for us, if we do not realize what was at stake and what we were saved from, then Jesus does become less exciting than a baseball game. The more I focus on Who the Lord Jesus is, the more I focus on how much He loves me, and the more I realize just how amazing our Savior is, I just can't help but want to go to the rooftops and shout it out!

The psalmist begins his psalm with this and then he identifies who should be on the rooftops to sing His praise: "All the earth!" All the "earth" does not mean the "ground." The way I learned it as a child was "all ye lands," meaning that all the people of the earth should be doing this. Everything that has life on this earth should be making a joyful noise to the Lord; not just the Israelites, not just the believers, not just the people of the covenant, but everyone. All the people who do not acknowledge Him as the Lord of Lords or perhaps don't even know who He is should be doing this as they, too, will soon know. Someday all eyes will see Him.

Once the psalmist has set the tone of the psalm, the next line makes perfect sense. "Serve the LORD with gladness!" Of course gladness, but as opposed to what? It is not obligatory. It is not a burden. You see, once the Holy Spirit moves in our lives and transforms us from the inside out, which Jesus refers to as being "born again," **He** becomes the desire of our heart and we freely **want** to serve Him. It's not, "Oh, I guess I have to go to church because good Christians are supposed to go to church so I'll make myself go" or "I have to follow His commandments even though I'd rather do something else" or "I guess good Christians have to forgive people" or "I guess I have to serve other people." There's a sense of obligation, that we are supposed to do it because He said so, but that is not the spirit at all! When our heart is transformed by the Holy Spirit, He becomes the desire of our heart. We **want** to come here and worship Him. We **want** to be with the brothers and sisters. We **want** to do everything in our life to reflect what He taught. Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will follow My commandments" (John 14:15). It should flow over us freely because it is who we are, it is who the Holy Spirit has enabled us to become. We want to serve! We want to love! We want to be the hands and feet of God in the world!

The psalmist says, "serve the LORD with gladness." Is this not true of anyone that you love? Think about your spouse, your children, your grandchildren; is it a burden to do things for them? No! You want the opportunity to do something for them. The psalmist is saying the same thing about our relationship with Almighty God.

There is a wonderful logo at Boys Town in Omaha. It shows a boy who's carrying a smaller boy on his shoulders. It's a true-life scene which Father Flanagan witnessed. He remarked to the boy that it must be quite a burden to carry the smaller boy around, but the little boy joyfully said, "He ain't heavy, Father...he's m' brother." Because he loves his brother, carrying him is not a burden at all.

The psalmist then says, "Come into his presence." I want you to meditate on that phrase for just a bit because we often pass it by. Do you appreciate what an awesome privilege it is to have access to the

Almighty Creator of the universe, the One who rules over all? When you pray, do you realize to Whom you are speaking? The more we think about it, the more we realize that we should be more mindful and not approach Him casually or nonchalantly.

People say to me, "I talk to God all the time. I talk to Him in my car, I talk to Him when I'm in the shower..." It's great that you feel you have that level of intimacy, that you feel you can go to God and have that kind of accessibility, but do you realize that the reason you can do that is because of Jesus Christ? He paid the price! The Scripture says that on the day He died the veil of the temple was ripped in half. That means you **do** have accessibility. But even though you do have accessibility, do you realize to Whom you are speaking?

Do you think you could just nonchalantly walk into the Oval Office and start talking to the President? Do you think you could walk up anytime and talk to your favorite celebrity? Think of the way in which we are in awe of other human beings. I know you admire people, but they are just human beings like everyone else. Yet we feel we can start talking to the Creator of the Universe as if He were a casual acquaintance.

You've heard the phrase "familiarity breeds contempt." Maybe in this case it is not contempt, but we must be careful that with such familiarity we do not take God for granted and try to bring Him down to a manageable size. In the person of Jesus, we have a level of intimacy, but we must never lose sight of who He is.

You will notice that in the Scripture passage the word LORD is in capital letters. That is not just to show respect. The Israelites had a wonderful discipline when they were reading Scripture. In the Old Testament, wherever you see the word "LORD" in capital letters, in the original Hebrew the holy name for God, "Yahweh," was printed. The Israelites took seriously the commandment to not take the Lord's name in vain. Most often people think the commandment means not to use the Lord's name profanely, but in fact it means not to make reference to the Lord frivolously or in a disrespectful way or without due honor.

How often do people say, “Oh, my God”? How many people use that phrase all the time? It is this to which the commandment is referring. Sometimes a person I haven’t seen in a long time will greet me with, “Steven! Oh, my God!” I then respond, “No, it’s just me!” We make these references to God without thinking. Do we realize to Whom we are referring?

What does the psalmist now add? “Come into His presence with singing.” We don’t come into His presence ashamed or afraid or sad; humble, certainly, but we come with much joy. He wants us to come with singing for who He is, for how much He loves us. We have joy in our hearts as we come into His presence. A common image of a happy person is of one with a spring in his step who is perhaps starting to hum or whistle or sing. This is the spirit that the psalmist has in mind. It is similar to how we come into worship. When we come into the presence of Almighty God, we come bringing something. In worship we don’t come just to see the show, we bring something of ourselves. We do not come just to receive, we come to bring something to bless Him.

Some of you have heard me say this before, but I believe with all my heart that Almighty God loves it when we sing to Him. Think how precious it is when a little child sings a song for you. It melts your heart. It doesn’t matter if the song is a little off-key or if the words are a little muddled, it’s the fact that the child wants to bring you a gift and it touches your heart.

One of my favorite Christmas songs is “The Little Drummer Boy.” You know how the story goes: a little drummer boy goes to Bethlehem to visit the manger of the baby Jesus like everyone else. But everyone else is bringing rich gifts and the little drummer can only offer himself and his little drum. He looks at Mary asking, “Shall I play for Him?” The line that always gets to me—especially when the Vienna Boys Choir sings it—is, “and then He smiled at me.” When you sing to Almighty God in whatever way you are able, it puts a smile on His face.

Next, the psalmist tries to clarify our relationship. He says, “Know that the LORD (Yahweh), he is God.” He is God and we are not! He is the Creator, we are the created. There is nothing in creation that replaces God! From Genesis to Revelation the Bible reflects concern about idolatry: things in our lives that take precedence over God. What shapes us, what do we value, what takes precedence in our lives? I don’t love anyone more than my dear wife, but she knows she will always be second in my life just as I will always be second in hers because Jesus Christ is first. But this enables me to love at a depth that I never could on my own. It is important for us to understand that He is God, we are not. It is our job to follow His ways and not to get Him to follow ours. We are not self-made people.

We often hear the phrase “a self-made” man. Once someone responded that where he came from everyone had a father and a mother! We do not create ourselves. We do our part with what God has given us, but we do not accomplish things and do things entirely on our own. He is Sovereign over us.

We must grasp that our lives do not belong to us. They were paid for at a great price. Our lives belong to Him and He is free to do with our lives as He sees fit. But friends, this is great news! This is wonderful news that our lives are not our own, that they belong to Him because look what the psalmist says: “We are his people and the sheep of his pasture.” We are His precious possessions. We aren’t something that’s unimportant, that can just be thrown away. He made us in His own image. We matter to Him because He made us, and we are His. In fact, we matter so much that He made a great sacrifice so He could spend eternity with us.

Jesus, as the Scripture teaches us, is God in the flesh. God is omniscient and omnipresent. I firmly believe that when Jesus Christ hung on that cross, when He was going through that unspeakable pain and suffering, He had my name in mind. It is as if He said when He was on the cross dying that He wanted to spend eternity with Steven Grant! And not just me! He was also thinking of each of you!

You matter immensely. We can accept the fact that our lives are not our own but belong to Him! To Whom would we rather belong?

The psalmist talks about the sheep and the shepherd. What does the shepherd do? The shepherd cares for his sheep. He feeds his sheep. He protects and guides his sheep. Friends, if ever at any point in your life you look in the mirror and think that your life isn't worth much; if you have bad feelings about yourself or are feeling deflated for some reason and wonder why you are even still here, remember that **you matter!** You were created in the image of God and you matter so much that He went to a lot of trouble to spend eternity with you. God made you and is continuing to shape you more and more in the likeness of His Son. God does not make mistakes!

With that in mind, see what the psalmist says, "Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise!" Of course! If all that I have just said is true, why would you not want to be full of thanks and praise? Give thanks to Him. To live a life full of gratitude and praise is a recognition that all good gifts come from God.

In a few moments, after the offertory and before we sing the final hymn, we are going to sing a one verse hymn that we used to sing all the time in our Presbyterian churches called the "Doxology." It begins "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," which acknowledges that every good gift we have and every blessing in our life comes from His benevolent hand. We want to thank Him for everything and to give credit where credit is due.

You might say, but didn't **you** work hard, and didn't **you** earn a lot of things and work hard to build your career and build your finances? Yes, I had to do my part, but Who was it that gave me the opportunity to do all those things? Who gave me the ability and brought people into my life to help me? Who saw fit to have me born in the United States so I could have all those opportunities? All blessings still ultimately come from Him. I have also worked very, very hard for things I did **not** get. I worked hard on things that did **not** go the way I want-

ed them to go. But whereas He may not have given me this, He did give me that and that and that and that ... the list is endless.

Sometimes folks come into my office miserable because they are so focused on the one thing—or those two things—they don't have or that happened in their life. They fail to see the abundance of the blessings all I around them. I know one lady who is still angry about something that happened 50 years ago; she chooses to hold onto it. It is a choice. We don't have to do that; we **choose** to do that. We focus on those few bad things in our life that happened or didn't happen or something that we didn't get that has become an idol.

Psalm 23 ends by saying "Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." His goodness and mercy are all around us, but we become so focused and so upset about what we don't have that we miss the rest. A life habit of giving thanks and praise is what leads to a happy heart in all seasons of life. It is one of the quickest ways to heal.

I want you to think about something. What was the very first thing you did this morning? Yes, you woke up. Do you realize how many people around the world did not do that? When they closed their eyes, it was for the last time. You woke up, and when you woke up you probably opened your eyes, and with varying degrees of proficiency, you could see. Many people cannot see. Do you see where I'm going with this? You were breathing! Do you realize how many people cannot breathe without help? You lay in a comfortable bed. Do you realize that a quarter the world's population does not sleep in beds? You have a roof over your head; a lot of people don't have that. You needed to move. You can move! You can put your feet on the floor. A quarter of the world's population doesn't have floors, they have dirt. You can stand up and you can walk; you can go into a room and there's light. You turn the faucet and have clean water.

If you were to analyze your life at that minute level, when the psalmist says, "My cup runneth over," you would realize it is the under-

statement of the century! The list is endless! You are enjoying His blessings every single day of your life. Let me ask you, where is it written that you are **entitled** to any of this? Nowhere! Every single day, in His providence, He gives us such abundance. We are blessed with these things. That is why the psalmist's closing line makes perfect sense. "For the LORD is good." That phrase, that principle, that the Lord is good, is the umbrella under which all life must be understood. When you experience the good, the bad and the ugly in life, it all must be in the context of that truth, that God is good. We must be able to trust in His purpose and be able to trust in what He is doing at all times. We may not always understand what He is doing and why He is doing it. As Dr. Pratt mentioned a few weeks ago, the Bible does not say that all things are good, but that God is good and that what He is doing is good.

Look what the psalmist says, "His steadfast love endures forever." It is constant. There are no gaps. There is no break. He does not forget about you. He's not playing games. As you approach any season of life or any event, all joys and all sorrows are to be understood in the context of the fact that God is good. Understanding that God is good becomes part of our spiritual DNA.

My friends, His faithfulness doesn't end with you. The psalm ends this way: "... and his faithfulness to all generations." He will be as faithful in the future as He has been in the past. Your family, our church, this country and the world are all still in His hands. As each one of us anticipates the day when we will close our eyes for the last time, we can trust that God will take care of those we leave behind. What an amazing psalm! Just a few short verses full of truth that sustains us in this life and leads us forward to the everlasting joy in the next. ■

