

1 Chronicles 16:7-36 – Creation Dancing

⁷ That day David first committed to Asaph and his associates this psalm of thanks to the LORD:

⁸ Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name;
make known among the nations what he has done.

⁹ Sing to him, sing praise to him;
tell of all his wonderful acts.

¹⁰ Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.

¹¹ Look to the LORD and his strength;
seek his face always.

¹² Remember the wonders he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced,

¹³ O descendants of Israel his servant,
O sons of Jacob, his chosen ones.

¹⁴ He is the LORD our God;
his judgments are in all the earth.

¹⁵ He remembers his covenant for ever,
the word he commanded, for a thousand generations,

¹⁶ the covenant he made with Abraham,
the oath he swore to Isaac.

¹⁷ He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree,
to Israel as an everlasting covenant:

¹⁸ “To you I will give the land of Canaan
as the portion you will inherit.”

¹⁹ When they were but few in number,
few indeed, and strangers in it,

²⁰ they wandered from nation to nation,
from one kingdom to another.

²¹ He allowed no man to oppress them;
for their sake he rebuked kings:

²² “Do not touch my anointed ones;
do my prophets no harm.”

²³ Sing to the LORD, all the earth;
proclaim his salvation day after day.

²⁴ Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvellous deeds among all peoples.

²⁵ For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;
he is to be feared above all gods.

²⁶ For all the gods of the nations are idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.

²⁷ Splendour and majesty are before him;
strength and joy in his dwelling-place.

²⁸ Ascribe to the LORD, O families of nations,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength,

²⁹ ascribe to the LORD the glory due to his name.

Bring an offering and come before him;
 worship the LORD in the splendour of his holiness.
³⁰ Tremble before him, all the earth!
 The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved.
³¹ Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
 let them say among the nations, "The LORD reigns!"
³² Let the sea resound, and all that is in it;
 let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them!
³³ Then the trees of the forest will sing,
 they will sing for joy before the LORD,
 for he comes to judge the earth.

³⁴ Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
 his love endures for ever.
³⁵ Cry out, "Save us, O God our Saviour;
 gather us and deliver us from the nations,
 that we may give thanks to your holy name,
 that we may glory in your praise."
³⁶ Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel,
 from everlasting to everlasting.
 Then all the people said "Amen" and "Praise the LORD."

1 Chronicles 16:7-36 (NIV)

The Book of Chronicles

The book or books of Chronicles do not often attract our attention, after all, they are only an alternative version of Samuel and Kings, aren't they? Well actually, no, they're not. In the Hebrew Bible, Chronicles is the last of the books, situated right at the end of what we refer to as the Old Testament. As such, it sums up the whole story of Israel, beginning with Adam (1 Chronicles 1:1) and telling the story through to the return from Exile. It is written after the return from exile and is written for those who have returned from exile. It is written looking back over the long history of God's dealings with his people.

The passage we are looking at occupies a central place in this whole story. This song, recorded here in 1 Chronicles 16, is a psalm of David which he composed for the musicians of Israel. It is a psalm which was prompted by a particular event. You will find sections of this song recorded also in the Book of Psalms:

verses 8-22 in Psalm 105:1-15;
 verses 23-33 in Psalm 96;
 verses 34-36 in Psalm 106:1, 47-48.

This has led to much learned debate over which came first. Is 1 Chronicles 16 a compilation from these other psalms or did these other psalms borrow from this song of David? This may be a very interesting question, but at the end of the day any answer would be speculative. What we need to do is to look at what is written *here*; we need to read it in the context in which it has been placed, to listen to what is being said and to hear what God is saying to us through it for our encouragement and our learning.

The context in 1 Chronicles

What, then, is the context of this psalm within the book of Chronicles – what is the "that day" of verse 7?

David had defeated all of the major enemies of Israel. In a sense, he had completed the conquest of the Promised Land. He had also united Israel under his own kingship – uniting the northern and southern tribes. He had then captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites and had made it the capital of his united kingdom. It is here that he had built a house, or a royal palace, for himself.

But the Ark of the Covenant had not yet been brought up to Jerusalem. This wooden chest containing the stone tablets engraved with the law of God was the symbol of God's presence with his people. Symbolically, it constituted the throne of God (see 1 Chronicles 13:6). This ark had been carried before them during their time in the wilderness and had gone before them when they crossed the Jordan to enter the Promised Land. It was because God was with them, "enthroned between the cherubim" that they had been able to possess the land he had promised them.

David's first attempt to bring the ark up to Jerusalem had proved to be a disaster. It had been loaded onto a bullock cart and when the cart was driven across rough ground Uzzah, one of the men guiding the cart, had put out his hand to steady it and had been struck dead by God. As a result, David was afraid of the Lord God (see 1 Chronicles 13:12) and had made no further attempt to move the ark.

But over the intervening months God had blessed the household of Obed-Edom with whom the ark had been left on that awful day. So David at last decided to have another go at bringing the ark into his capital city. On this second occasion it was all done in a very different manner. In accordance with God's command the ark was now carried by the Levites (15:2) and David assembled priestly singers to accompany the ark. And so, with much singing and celebration, the ark of the Lord was at last brought into Jerusalem (15:28).

David himself accompanied the ark, celebrating its arrival at Jerusalem with dancing and with singing as an expression of his great joy (and relief) at this occasion. Such was his behaviour that it disgusted his wife, Michal, the daughter of Saul, who thought that this was no way for a *king* to behave. And maybe there are some of us with a typically British sense of reserve who would have a great deal of sympathy for Michal – perhaps David had got a little carried away on this occasion.

But note, David's dancing was not an expression of levity for it is accompanied by his appeal in 16:29b-30a, "Worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness. Tremble before him all the earth!" David's behaviour was a culturally relevant expression of his great joy. David was celebrating along with the crowd. And it is precisely this that Michal objects to – that David was not displaying the dignity she thought he should display as their *king*, he was behaving like one of the crowd.

Yet this had been a deliberate act on David's part. He was dressed in plain linen clothes like the Levites. He deliberately refused to act like a great king on that day because he was welcoming *God's* entrance into Jerusalem. He was concerned that the Lord their God should occupy the central place among his people. By this very act David was declaring that he is not the great king in Jerusalem. Rather, the Lord God enthroned between the cherubim is the Lord enthroned in Zion – he is the great King and this is the now the city of God, the city of the Great King.

And it is against this background that we are to read this psalm of praise that occupies 1 Chronicles 16:8-36.

Verses 8-22: A rehearsal of what God has done for his people

Verses 8 and 9 begin with a call to thanks and praise for all God's wonderful acts. This is reinforced in verse 12 with a call to remember the wonders God has done with a particular emphasis on God's judgments (verses 12b-14).

When David speaks here of God's judgments he is using the term not in the sense that God has said this thing is right and that matter is wrong but that he has *acted* to put things right. God has acted to fulfil his own purposes and to set things right – to make things the way he wants them to be. These judgments, then, are particularly those acts by which he has fulfilled the covenant promises he made to Abraham (verses 15-18). He has done what he promised to Abraham and, by acts of judgment has brought Israel safely into this land. He has protected them when they were weak and were strangers in the land and has brought them safely to this day (verses 19-22).

The psalm celebrates God's faithfulness in bringing Israel to this day when the conquest of the land is complete and the ark of the Lord has been brought up to Jerusalem. Now, with great celebration the Lord is enthroned among his people, enthroned in Zion. "See what God has done for us!" the psalm exclaims.

But it is not Israel alone who is called to see what God has done; the nations are also called to recognise these great acts of God (verse 8). And it is this that leads into the theme of the second part of this wonderful psalm.

Verses 23-33: All the world is called to join the celebration

Verses 23-30 are a call for all the world to recognise what God has done for Israel – to recognise that their God is the living God, the creator of all things, the maker of heaven and earth. All the earth is called to tremble before him and to ascribe to the Lord the glory due to his name.

But there is more here than a call for all the world to recognise what God has done for Israel. Listen to how this section ends in verses 31-33:

- ³¹ Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
let them say among the nations, "The LORD reigns!"
³² Let the sea resound, and all that is in it;
let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them!
³³ Then the trees of the forest will sing,
they will sing for joy before the LORD,
for he comes to judge the earth.

It includes a call for *all creation* to join the celebration.

The ark's coming to Jerusalem is a symbol or picture of the Lord enthroned in Zion, enthroned over all the earth. As such it is a foretaste of, and pointer to far greater things that God will yet accomplish.

When God first made covenant promises to Abraham he declared that through Abraham and his descendants all nations would be blessed. And in this, God's promise to Abraham, set against the background of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, was his answer to a *world* gone wrong, to a *creation* gone wrong.

One day, God will come in judgment – come to put all things right. On that day the whole of creation *will* celebrate just as David and the Israelites celebrated on this day as the ark is brought into Jerusalem. On *that* day the Lord God will manifestly reign over all the earth.

So David invites the nations to join in his celebration, recognising what God *has* done in establishing his kingdom in Israel as an anticipation of what he will yet do in establishing his reign over all the earth – over all creation.

But the psalm ends on a sadder note.

Verses 34-36: The post-exilic prayer

As 1 Chronicles records these events it does so from the perspective of the returning exiles. They look back to the heady days when God established his kingdom in Israel under David. They long for God to do it again:

- ³⁴ Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures for ever.
- ³⁵ Cry out, "Save us, O God our Saviour;
gather us and deliver us from the nations,
that we may give thanks to your holy name,
that we may glory in your praise."
- ³⁶ Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting.

These verses express the longing that God would gather his scattered people from all the nations and establish his everlasting kingdom in the earth. This cry finds its answer only in the Lord Jesus Christ, David's greater son.

I want to take you to another day in Jerusalem. Not to the day when this wooden chest was carried into the city with shouts of celebration, but to the day when a wooden cross was carried from the city on the back of Jesus to shouts of derision and mockery and to the sound of much weeping. I want to take you to the day when Jesus was nailed to that cross and it was raised up from the ground. For if we can but see it, here also is a day of triumph and of enthronement. Here is a day marking the defeat, not of the plans of God but of all the powers opposed to his kingdom. Jesus, the Lord, reigns from that tree.

It is by this means that this post-exilic prayer is answered, "Save us, O God our Saviour; gather us and deliver us from the nations", for it is by *this* means that God is pleased to gather to himself a people from every nation, tribe and tongue – "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (John 12:32).

"Can you see it yet?"

This is what Rolf Harris used to say as he painted his speedy pictures – "Can you see it yet?" This is the question that confronts us over and over again as we read the Scriptures.

The world in which we live appears utterly chaotic and out of control. Often we are caused to ask, "What on earth is God doing?"

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews recognises that Jesus is Lord of all but, at the same time, he acknowledges that this is not evident in the current state of the world. He concludes, "At present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus ... crowned with glory and honour." (Hebrews 2:8b-9a).

Can you see it yet? Have you seen it yet?

This must have centre place in our perspective, as the coming of the ark to Jerusalem occupied centre place in the perspective of the Chronicler. Jesus *is* Lord, by virtue of his death and resurrection. He *is* enthroned over all the earth. And one day that will be manifest to all when God comes again in judgment, comes to set all things right. On that day the whole of creation will dance and rejoice at his coming.

So what?

This leads into two very obvious points of application:

Firstly, what God has done for us in Christ calls for great celebration and praise: for jubilant thanksgiving and for songs of joy. It calls for celebration marked by a depth of wonder:

worship the LORD in the splendour of his holiness.

Tremble before him, all the earth! [verses 29b-30a]

We ought to be filled with amazement and praise that the creator God, the God of all the universe, has remembered his covenant and has come to save us through his Son, Jesus the Christ. We are invited, even commanded, to join the celebration as we recognise that Jesus Christ is Lord – Lord of all the earth.

Secondly, what God has done for us calls for proclamation. We must let the whole world know what God has done:

make known among the nations what he has done...

Sing to the LORD, all the earth;

proclaim his salvation day after day.

Declare his glory among the nations,

his marvellous deeds among all peoples. [verses 8b, 23-24]

We need to call upon all the earth to recognise what God has done in Jesus Christ, calling them to join in the celebration *now*, and in so doing to anticipate the day when God will come to set all things right: when the whole of creation will sing and dance in his presence.

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