

Psalm 30
Rolf Jacobson

I raise you up, O Lord, for you have drawn me up,
 you did not let my foes rejoice over me!
O Lord my God, I cried to you for help,
 and you healed me!
O Lord, you lifted me right out of the earth,
 and gave me new life instead of letting me sink down.

Sing to the Lord, O his faithful ones!
 Confess! So that his holiness might be remembered!
For his anger is momentary,
 But in his favor there is a lifetime of life!
Weeping might overnight for an evening,
 but in the morning: Joy!

As for me, I said in my prosperity,
 “I shall never be moved.”
By your favor, O LORD,
 you had established me as a strong mountain;
you hid your face;
 I was dismayed.
To you, O LORD, I cried,
 and to the LORD I made supplication:
“What profit is there in my death,
 if I go down to the Pit?
Will the dust praise you?
 Will it tell of your faithfulness?
Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me!
 O LORD, be my helper!”

You have turned my mourning into dancing;
 you stripped off my sackcloth
 and clothed me with joy,

so that glory itself sings about you and is not silent.
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

Grace to you and peace . . .

In order to communicate truth, most of the times, humans use prose. You know, full sentences, complete paragraphs, linear logic. Prose is fine for propositional truth or for flat, mundane things such congressional hearings, news reports, and the sports section. But at times, in order to move people to change and communicate the most profound truths of the human condition, humans have needed to go beyond prose, to parable, prophecy, and poetry.

- Lincoln at Gettysburg, reshaping the purpose of the American Civil War: “Four score and seven years ago,” he began poetically, and concluded with the poetic promise “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.
- Or the African American poet Paul Dunbar in his poem

“Sympathy,” evokes the pain and hope of the oppressed:

It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings –
I know why the caged bird sings.

Poetic!

This distinction is true when it comes to biblical truth as well.

For some kinds of truth—such as biblical truths about the vast expanse of God’s love and the powerful experiences of God’s salvation—there are times when prose simply will not do. Prose is fine for propositional truth or for flat, mundane things such as commandments, or biblical history, or genealogies. But to communicate God’s character and God’s agency, divine salvation and spiritual healing, at times the Bible needs to speak in parables, or prophetic visions, or poetry. Because where prose describes, poetry evokes.

Psalm 30 offers just such evocative proclamations of divine salvation:

[The Report: He Lifted Me!]

The psalm begins with a report. The report comes in the form of word of praise confessing an experience of divine rescue. The psalmist praises God and reports on the reversal of circumstances:

I raise you up, O Lord, for you have drawn me up,
 you did not let my foes rejoice over me!
O Lord my God, I cried to you for help,
 and you healed me!
O Lord, you lifted me right out of the earth,
 and gave me new life instead of letting me sink down.

[The Invitation: Join Me!]

Following the report, the psalmist then issues an invitation. An invitation in the form of call for the community to join the praise—
“Come join the choir,” the psalmist says, “lift up your voice, because God has lifted me!”

Sing to the Lord, O his faithful ones!
 Confess! So that his holiness might be remembered!
For his anger is momentary,
 But in his favor there is a lifetime of life!
Weeping might overnight for an evening,
 but in the morning: Joy!

At this point we have to pause and revel in the poetry. . . One of the things about poetry is that it state things ambiguously. And the ambiguities in poetry and song beg us to stop to consider, does the poem intend “this meaning” or “that meaning”?

“You have drawn me up,” the psalmist confesses, “you lifted me right out of the earth.” And because of that, he says to the community, “Sing to the Lord!”

The Report, Part 2: “To you, O Lord, I Cried”

Then the psalmist recalls both the old, pre-crisis feeling of invulnerability as well as the plunge into the depths of the crisis.

As for me, when things were easy, I said,
“I’ll never get shaken up.”

In your favor, O Lord,
you had established me as a strong mountain.
Then you hid your face;
I was dismayed.
To you, O Lord, I cried,
and to the Lord I made supplication:
“What profit is there in my death?
If I go down to the **pit**
Will the dust praise you?
Will it tell of your loving faithfulness?
Hear, O Lord! Show me some **grace**
O Lord, be my helper!” (author’s translation)

It is interesting that the psalmist twice recalls what was on his or her tongue.

First, there was the pre-crisis feeling that everything is going pretty well:

“When things were easy, I said, ‘I’ll never get shaken up.’”

But that was before. Before “you hid your face.”

When my son Gunnar was young, he liked to play a form of old “object-permanence” game most kids like to play. He would cover his face up with a blanket and ask, “Where Gunnar go?” Then he’d pull down the blanket and joyfully exclaim, “There he is!” Then — because he was two years old — he would do it again. “Where Gunnar go?” “There he is!” And again. And again.

The psalmist had experienced a reverse instance of the Where-Gunnar-go-object-permanence discovery.

God had always been there for the psalmist. At the right hand. In the passenger seat. Almost near enough and present enough to touch.

And then, well, God was gone. “You hid your face.”

So the psalmist gave it a go: “Hear, O Lord! Show me some grace!” And God did. The psalm doesn’t describe in precise terms exactly what the crisis was. Maybe it was illness, or injury, or debt, or war, or deportation, or depression, or loneliness, or the death of a loved one, or crop failure, or a drought, or divorce, or a house-fire.

Nor does the psalm describe what form God’s grace took. Maybe it was healing, or a gift of money, or peace, or security, or rescue, or a gentle rain, or a new love. Or maybe it was a high-school German teacher coming over with an ugly gift.

Mourning into Dancing

Having offered a sacrifice of praise in the form of testimony, Psalm 30 closes with one of the most beautifully heart-aching sentences in the entire Bible:

You have turned my mourning into dancing!
you stripped off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
So that glory itself sings about you and is not silent,
O Lord my God, I will praise you forever. (author’s translation)

What an incredibly beautiful line: “You have turned my mourning into dancing! You stripped off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy!”

The psalmist uses two metaphors—one of movement and one of clothing—to describe the transformative deliverance of God. I don’t know if you’ve ever been so depressed, or so sick, or so wracked with grief that you could not move. When I was a teenager fighting cancer, I recall watching people dancing on TV and thinking, “Why would anybody want to do that?” The psalmist recalls exactly such a time when suffocating grief paralyzed her. But now she exclaims with wonder, “You made me dance!”

Switching metaphors, the psalmist describes wearing the clothing of repentance and grief. Again, have you ever gone through a season of life when you could not imagine putting on a bright color or wearing a smile? The psalmist recalls such a season but then marvels at God’s grace and says, “You have clothed me with joy!” Note that the poetry describes something that isn’t literally possible—you cannot be clothed with joy. And yet the impossible poetic flourish in instantaneously

understandable. God removes sackcloth from mortal sinners and clothes them with joy.

God is what God does. And this is what God does for you in Christ Jesus. God forgives sinners. God justifies the ungodly. God turns mourning into dancing. God strips off the wardrobes of sin and death and clothes mortals with eternal joy.

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