

Above All Things

by Alistair Begg

The sermon emphasizes the importance of knowing God through general and special revelation, and encourages listeners to praise God with all their heart as an act of evangelistic worship.

Duration: 34:34

Scripture: Psalm 138:2, Proverbs 16:18, Isaiah 2:11, Matthew 6:33, Philipians 2:3, James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:6

Topics: "Worship And Praise", "Exalting God"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the importance of exalting God's name and word above all else. The verse 'You have exalted above all things your name and your word' serves as an antidote to pride and self-promotion. It reminds us that our understanding of God's disclosure and the benefits we receive from Him begin with Him. Additionally, the verse provides an illustration of evangelistic worship, emphasizing the need for heartfelt praise and the power of singing in reviving the people of God throughout history.

Transcript

Father, we come to your Word in light of the truth of your Son, and we pray that as we turn to its pages, what we know not, you will teach us. What we have not, you will give us. And what we are not, you will make us.

For Christ's sake. Amen. Now, you'll find our text this morning in the second verse of Psalm 138, and in the second half of that verse, which reads, You have exalted above all things your name and your word.

If you're alert, you will also have noticed that that text--our text for this morning, as it turns out--is on the front cover of your bulletin. And if you are particularly perceptive, some of you will have noticed that the very same words are carved into a slab of polished granite, which appears at the very front entrance to our building. Many of the people who are present in these services this morning are from a company that has been with us over the weekend, already referred to those who have gathered from some twenty-seven states, who listen routinely, they tell us, to Truth For Life on the radio.

We invited them to come in order that they might see what we refer to as the monkeys in their natural habitat. And part of that was their being able to sit beside you now and in the first and then in the third service in worship today. We recognize that when anybody comes and visits in their home, they're hoping for an opportunity to see what they're like up close and personal.

It's one thing to see photographs, it's another to hear a voice, but it's something else to come and find out who all the people are, how the bits and pieces fit in. And essentially, I think, if folks were honest, they came here this weekend in part to see who's who and to find out what's what. And because that is in the minds of some, and because it is routinely helpful for us to recalibrate ourselves as a church, I determined that we would look at the verse which, on the seventh of January 1993, was laid into the stone wall outside us there.

And that, of course, comes in this 138th Psalm, which was read for us--a psalm which begins with David commenting, rejoicing in the covenant faithfulness of God. "I will praise your name," he says in verse 2, "for your love and your faithfulness." And the phraseology that is used there in Hebrew is that which speaks of the fact that God has covenanted to be true to his own, to establish the hands of his people, to bring them safely through the circumstances of their lives. And David here provides us immediately with a wonderful example of both boldness and humility--the boldness that is prepared to sing no matter who hears, and the humility which declares, "I will bow down towards your holy temple." And he explains that his actions should be understood in light of God's self-disclosure.

That's the significance of the second conjunction. "For you have exalted above all things your name and your word. I will praise you, I will bow down to you, I will bless you for your love and your faithfulness.

For because, in light of the fact that you have done this, you have exalted above all things your name and your word." Now, the significance of this is to be found, first of all, in the fact that by these means, God discloses himself, or makes himself known, or in theological terminology, reveals himself. This is not some kind of arm's-length notion, locked away in a dusty library or in some academic theological environment, but this is a matter of great importance for every believer. Indeed, it is a matter of importance for those who as yet don't know if they do believe.

And there are some this morning without question who are here, and you don't really know where you stand in relationship to the things about which we've been singing. And you may even have found the words intriguing--and I hope you have--and perhaps wondered why it is that people around you seem to sing them with a measure of forcefulness and enthusiasm. Especially because you might be saying to yourself, I don't know who God is, and I don't know where God is, and I haven't actually managed to make contact with him at all.

Well, what the Bible tells us is that there is a reason for this--that as creatures and as those who are flawed by sin, we do not know God. And furthermore, we cannot know God by our own moral endeavors or by our intellectual pursuits. In short, there is no intellectual road to God, so that we can't, by searching, find God.

We can't sit down and analyze our way to God. The only way that we can know God is if God chooses to put himself freely within the range of our perception. Unless God chooses to do so, we're stuck.

As Calvin put it, it remains for God to give witness of himself from heaven. And, of course, the great claim of the Bible is that God has done exactly this, and that he has made himself known, disclosed himself, revealed himself. Theologians, when they speak about revelation, speak about it in two categories, and I'm going to tell you what they are.

It's a refresher course for some and information for others. First of all, they say that God has revealed himself in a general way, or general revelation. In other words, he has given a revelation of himself that he

has made to all people at all times in all places.

And this in two primary ways. First, by way of creation. So that the psalmist says, the heavens declare you the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork.

Day after day they pour forth speech, and night unto night they display knowledge. And then he's able to say there is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the to the words, their words to the ends of the world.

Now, what he's simply saying is this, that whether you speak Vietnamese, whether you live in the Southern Hemisphere or the Northern Hemisphere, whether you live in the remote islands of the Hebrides of Scotland, or whether you live in the heartlands of America, God has disclosed something of himself in the very act of creation. And that's why the old song by the Bachelors had such an appeal for a certain amount of time. It was probably sung by someone else here in America.

But you remember it. Every time I hear a newborn baby cry, or touch a leaf, or see the sky, then I know why I believe. Well, you can believe to a certain extent, because God has, out of his grace, made this general revelation of himself.

That's why Paul, in Romans 1, says that men and women are without excuse, since all that God has disclosed of himself in this way is undeniable in its impact. Since the creation of the world, his invisible qualities, his eternal power, his divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. His general revelation in creation.

And secondly, his general revelation, as provided for us, in the human conscience. In the human conscience. One of the things that the agnostic inevitably has to wrestle with is, why do we have any sense of oughtness? Why do we care about anything at all? Why do I have this moral compass inside of me that says, Oh, you shouldn't be unkind to that person, or you feel a sense of regret and disappointment at an action that you have taken? Well, the answer that the Bible gives is very clear.

This is part of God's general revelation, that he has made men and women in his image, and part of his image is the fact of rationality and also the fact of moral propriety, of justice, of right and of wrong. And by this means, God discloses, reveals himself. Romans 2 addresses it.

Paul says, you know, the Gentiles, they didn't get the law of God. Moses didn't come down from the mountain and give it to the Gentiles. He gave it to the Jews.

So what about the Gentiles, he said? Well, he said, I can explain that as well. When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. What does that mean? Well, he says, verse 15 as well, which helps, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences bearing witness to the same.

And that is why, if you think about it, in the development of children, not only do we not have to teach children to be naughty--they come to it quite naturally--but nor do we have to explain to them the implications of their naughtiness. And every young mother wonders at why it is little Jeremy has gone to hide behind the Christmas tree. Well, that's because he just took four of the ornaments that Mommy said, do not touch these lovely chocolate ornaments, which are for later, and he's eaten three of them and jumped and tramped on the fourth one.

And now he is hiding behind the Christmas tree. Why? Well, presumably because his dad said, If you ever do anything naughty, hide behind the Christmas tree. No.

He's hiding behind the Christmas tree because of his conscience. Because of his conscience. And he's going to grow up and say, Why do I have a conscience? How do I have a conscience? The psalmist says, You've exalted above all things your name and your word.

You've disclosed yourself generally in creation and in conscience. And the second category of revelation is what we refer to as special revelation, which comes by way of the Bible, which is God's written Word, and then by way of Jesus, God's incarnate Word. So, I give you a little refresher course in theology here this morning.

At least you've got the rudiments of the doctrine of revelation. If somebody says, Well, how do we ever know God? And the answer is, Because God declares himself from heaven. Christianity begins with the disclosure of God, unlike other contemporary religions and ancient religions, which begin with man's attempt to discover God.

Well, somebody says, How does that happen? You'll be able to tell them, Well, it happens in a general way. That's why when we look up at the night sky, it makes us look beyond ourselves and wonder, and it happens by nature of our consciences, created as moral beings. But you'll have to go on and let them know that what is there by creation and by conscience, while it is sufficient to cause us to be accountable to God, it is not sufficient to bring us to faith in God.

And you see, that is the distinction between the starlit sky and the power of the cross. The starlit sky may cause us to wonder at the vastness of a Creator. The power of the cross brings us to an awareness of his intervention for us to correct our moral rectitude, our immoral stance.

And both his written Word and his incarnate Word are interwoven and can't be separated, because it is in his written Word that we meet the incarnate Word, Jesus, and it is by means of a knowledge of the incarnate Word, Jesus, that we're able to make sense of the written Word. That's why, until you learn the Bible, you'll never meet Jesus, and until you meet Jesus, you'll never really learn the Bible. That's why it's possible to come here Sunday by Sunday and listen and make superficial observations and make notes and discover things about religion or about Christianity and decide there are things you like and you dislike, and you continue on your way--completely untouched and unchanged by the message that is being proclaimed.

Until the Word, the Bible, comes home with impact to your mind, then you will never meet Jesus, and the Jesus that you like to remember will be an imaginary Jesus until you meet Jesus in the Bible. It's fascinating, isn't it? The book by Anne Rice on the first twelve years of Jesus' life--about which nobody knows anything at all--is a huge bestseller. And people buying that in airports all across America to read about the twelve years of Jesus' life--completely intrigued by it, totally irrelevant, really.

Fascinating, perhaps, in part, but no help to anybody at all. And the same people who will pay good money for that at the airport will not use good time to sit down and open their Bibles and find out how God has disclosed himself in the person of his Son. The Bible can only be properly understood and interpreted in light of Jesus, and the only Jesus there is to know is the Jesus made known to us in the Bible.

Émile Kailé--I need my French people here. In American it would be Kalliet, but it's not. It's Dr. Émile Kailé, who was a professor at Princeton, grew up, served in the First World War, was a naturalist, a rationalist, and an agnostic, if not a self-professed atheist.

In the trenches in the First World War, he was consumed by thoughts of emptiness. He was dispirited, discouraged, confused, couldn't understand what life was about, why we would spend our lives in this way. And he said in his biography that he longed to read a book that understood him, but he couldn't find one.

So he set out to write one. And he wrote in his journal observations and little scraps that he found here and there in an attempt, somehow or another, to provide material into which he could look, which would then speak back to him and give an explanation of his existence. And by the time he was finished and able to read it, it left him absolutely high and dry and flat and empty.

At that time, his wife, who had visited a little Huguenot chapel, had been given a Bible by the rather ancient pastor. She brought the Bible to Emil, her husband, somewhat diffidently, because she recognized that he had never read a Bible, had given no indication of interest in a Bible, and yet she felt pressed to pass it on to him. She did so, apologizing to her husband.

He then later wrote, I opened it and chanced upon the Beatitudes. I read and read and read and could not find words to express my awe and wonder. Suddenly the realization dawned upon me.

This was the book that would understand me. I needed it so much, yet unaware, I had attempted to write my own in vain. It's a great statement, isn't it? I mean, you gotta have some kind of ego and some kind of intellect to write the book that understands you.

But you know, isn't that what the average person is doing? You may be here, and you're trying to write your own book, chart your own course, explain your existence. How are you doing? How are you doing? I guarantee it's not very good. He said, As I read the Gospels, and the one of whom they spoke--written word, incarnate word--as I read the Gospels, and the one of whom they spoke, the one who spoke and acted in them became alive to me.

You have exalted above all things your name and your word. God's name, of course, unlike names that are given largely in the Western world, which are simply means of differentiating between one another, God's name speaks of his nature and his character and his being. In a similar way, I suppose, to other parts of our world--in Africa and in China and in other places, too--names had significance.

In the Bible, names had significance too. Hence the name change in relationship to Abram, and in relationship to Jacob, Israel. In the New Testament, Simon, the shaky one, becomes Peter, the rock-like one.

And the angel says, And you will give him the name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. There's significance in the name, because it speaks to the very character and being of the one who is named. And that's why, when you read the Old Testament, you find all these various names of God.

I won't go through them with you. I won't belabor them to you. But it is a useful study, and even with an English concordance, you may make a very happy and profitable Sunday afternoon sometime, considering the way in which God has disclosed himself by his very names.

Now, all of that, and more besides, is wrapped up, really, in the question, What does this mean, that God has exalted above all things his name and his Word? That's not all that it means, but that's, if you like, as your art teacher used to say, taking the pencil out of his pocket, Let me just show you how to draw this chair. I'll get you started, and you go on yourselves. That's really all I've done for you to get you started.

I want to spend the balance of the time--and it is not very long at all--saying, If that is something of what it means, tell me something of why it matters. Why does this matter? And I want to say four things to you, and this is essentially an outline, and I encourage your own follow-up. You have exalted above all things your name and your Word.

Why put that on the front of your bulletin? Why consider that after all this time? We haven't ever looked at this verse since 1993, which is quite a while ago, I think. It's probably thirteen years or something like that, moving on to fourteen, because it was January the seventh. And it's, Why did we do this this morning, then? Well, because, first of all, this verse serves as an antidote to pride and self-promotion.

It serves as an antidote to pride and self-promotion. Do you know anything about pride? Do you know anything about promoting yourself? I do. Do you know how easy it is for us to push ourselves to the front of the queue, to want to find our names in the article? Do you know how easily that happens to local church families, especially if they enjoy any kind of useful notoriety? Do you know how quickly that can pervade an organization and bring it to its knees? You have exalted above all things your name and your Word.

We remind ourselves of this today, Father, as an antidote to our pride and to our self-promotion. If you want an exercise, take Psalm 138 and read it out loud in the afternoon, placing special emphasis on the personal pronouns. And as you do, you will find that the recurring emphasis is all about him, all about God.

You are this. You have been this. You are worthy of this.

You deserve this. In other words, it serves as a reminder in walking through the doors that this is not something that begins with us. This is something that always begins with God--that all of our understanding of his disclosure begins with him, that all of our awareness of his benefit in our lives is extended to him and to us through him, and that ultimately, the end of our days, it is from him and through him and to him that all of the glory and all of the praise and all of the honor is deserved.

That's the first reason. The second reason is because it provides us with an illustration of what I want to call evangelistic praise. Or it provides us with an illustration of evangelistic worship.

I hadn't really noticed this before I read it again this week. I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart. We could stop on that for a long time, because it's a good question to ask ourselves, have I just engaged in the singing of these songs with all my heart? Have I even come close to using all my heart? David says, I will sing your praise with all my heart, and I'm going to do it before the gods.

I want all the kings of the earth to hear your name. I want all the kings of the earth to sing your worth. In other words, there is an evangelistic dimension to his praise.

When he danced coming back into town, and the peoples looked on, and even his own wife looked on and said, What in the world is going on with David? He has lost his mind. He said, I don't care whether you think I've lost my mind. I am happy to declare, both with my voice and my hands and my feet, the fact of who God is and what God has done.

You see, when you think about singing God's praise in the gathered congregation--for example, here Sunday by Sunday--there will always be people who are present, saying, I don't know the songs, I don't know the words, I don't know the tunes, I don't know anything about anything. And the temptation is for us to drop down, as it were, to where our friends and visitors are. I don't want to make Mr. X feel bad.

He doesn't apparently like singing, and I like singing, so why don't I just not sing? And because he's not singing, and then we'll all not sing together. And it just goes and runs like a ripple effect through the congregation. That's not the way to go.

Sing your heart out. Sing with all your heart. Sing with exuberance.

And be an example of evangelistic praise--the kind of thing that happens in 1 Corinthians. If you speak in a tongue, says Paul, people will come in and say, They must be out of their minds. I don't know what that's about.

But if you speak the Word of God authoritatively, if you declare God's glory and his goodness, people will actually fall down and say, Surely God is in this place. And this, in David's terminology, is an example of it. In fact, the Psalms are full of it.

I will declare your praise among the nations, he says. When Peter picks up all of that Old Testament phraseology in 1 Peter chapter 2 and describes those to whom he writes--remember, he says, You are a royal nation, a holy priesthood, a people belonging to God, who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light, so that you might declare his praises. So that you might declare his praises.

We were created to praise God. And when I don't praise God, it may be because I don't know God. Now, you will be able to understand this in reverse.

I can only speak of it from this side. I don't understand why you have to play an organ at baseball games, why you have to put a sign up on the wall that says, Charge! or says, Noise! or says, More noise! What's wrong with these people? Don't they care? You have to have a fifteen-foot electronic sign to say, It's time to get excited! Have you witnessed a South American soccer game? Have you seen the crazy Europeans? Did you hear them sing in Liverpool? With no choir director, no hymn books, no written music, and started by somebody somewhere, becoming a great, swelling cacophony of anthemized praise in relationship to that which is completely transient and ephemeral. So, I have to wonder whether in the absence of my exuberant praise it's just not in my heart.

Every time the people of God have been revived, they have sung. Check church history. They have sung.

They have literally sung their hearts out. You've exalted above all things your name and your word. Who like thee his praise should say? Penultimately, it provides us not only with an antidote to pride and self-promotion, an illustration of evangelistic praise, it also is a reminder to us of the fact that our walk with God is not without its tests and troubles.

And you have to notice the volitional dimension with which the praise takes place. Because the danger is that even in light of the illustration I've just used, we're waiting for some kind of emotional surge before we engage. No, the psalmist begins, I will praise you.

I will. Oh, yes, I will. Why? Because I should.

And when I do what I should do, I'll discover how wonderful it is to do what I ought to do, and in learning to do what I ought to do, I will love to do it more and more. And that praise is set within the rigors of life. All of us this morning have tears and disappointments.

All of us this morning have regrets and disappointments. All of us this morning have lives that are marked in some dimension by quiet desperation. And the wonderful thing about the psalmist is, he's able to include even within the one psalm the canticle of praise and the genuine lament of his life, and indeed the nature of his life, in terms of Luke at verse 7. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life.

And though I am enduring the anger of my foes, you stretch out your right hand, and you save me. I wouldn't want anybody here this morning to think that the story we were trying to tell from the Bible--which would be to obscure the Bible and twist the Bible--I wouldn't want anyone to think that the story of trusting God and living for God and discovering the nature of who Jesus is and what he's done is some kind of tranquil, triumphalistic existence that removes us from the realm of our foes and our failures and our foibles. Because it frankly doesn't.

It absolutely doesn't. And if anybody tells you that it does, you should just run a hundred miles from them and get a Bible and read it. You've exalted above all things your name and your word.

Therefore, there's no reason for any one of us to have a fat head. You've exalted above all things your name and your word. Therefore, we all ought to be involved in evangelistic praise.

You've exalted above all things your name and your word. Therefore, when I walk through trouble and when I face trials, I'll be able to keep some measure of equilibrium. And finally, you have exalted above all things your name and your word, and therefore you grant me the assurance that you will complete what you have begun.

Look at verse 8. The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me. Your love, O Lord, endures forever. Don't abandon the works of your hands.

It's always the question, isn't it? If I were to believe this Bible, if I were to entrust myself to this Jesus, most people would say, I don't think I probably should, because I'm not very good at finishing things. I'm not sure that I'll be able to keep it up right to the end. And the answer, of course, is, as Paul says in Philippians 1, verse 6, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

And that good work that he has purposed from all of eternity to accomplish will finally be consummated in a great gathering of praise, when in Revelation seven people from every tribe and nation and language and tongue will gather and declare that all of the power and all of the honor and all of the glory and all of the majesty belongs to God and to the Lamb who sits upon the throne. For those who are visiting, I want you to know that we put that piece of granite out there humbly and purposefully, that it serves as a constant challenge to each of us. And I want to remind the members of Parkside Church about who's who and about what's what.

It's all about him. Father, forgive us our pride and our self-assertiveness. Forgive our feeble praise.

Forgive our faltering steps when we begin to wonder whether you have abandoned your cause. And forgive us for being so proud as to think that we'll manage to bring everything to completion as necessary. We recognize this morning again that without you we can do nothing as we ought, and we pray that you

will help us then to do what we ought by the strength that you supply.

To him who is able to keep us from falling, to present us faultless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only wise God our Savior be glory and majesty, dominion and power. Now and forevermore. Amen.

That concludes this message. Thanks for listening to Truth For Life. If you'd like information on ordering additional messages from Alistair Begg and Truth For Life, then call our resource line at 1-888-58-TRUTH, write to us at Post Office Box 39-8000, Cleveland, OH 44139, or visit us online at truthforlife.org. Truth For Life, where the learning is for living.

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