

Psalm 114

SI: Last week I finished my sermon series on the Gospel. Today and next Sunday we’re going to look at two Psalms you might not be familiar with, two lesser known Psalms. But I haven’t chosen them at random. They have a connection with the Gospel, and you’ll be seeing that.

INTRO: Last month Allison and I watched the Ken Burns documentary on the history of Country Music. It was on PBS.

Ken Burns did the voiceover narration, but most of the commentary was by country music stars themselves and other people in the industry.

Dolly Parton, Merle Haggard, Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, Loretta Lynn and lots of others.

They were both featured subjects of the documentary and they offered their own critiques and opinions about other singers and songwriters and developments and musical influences within country music.

One thing that surprised me was their appreciation for lyrics.

They praised song lyrics that are catchy and singable.

They understood that’s what makes the big hits, and songwriters who can turn out those catchy hit lyrics one after another are admired.

But there were only a few songs that they would say have great lyrics and that rise to the all the others with their poetic excellence.

At one point Rosanne Cash is talking about *Pancho and Lefty* by Townes Van Zant.

She says this seems like a simple ballad, but it’s not simple at all.

She points out the unique metaphors and the unexpected ambiguity at the heart of the song, how it reflects the futility of life that Van Zant himself experiencing.

Merle and Willie made it a hit, but lyrically it’s a cut above most because of its poetic excellence.

God loves poetry. He’s a speaking God. He deals in words.

And he has placed into the heart of mankind a love for words and wordplay, songs and lyrics and poems.

Whether your taste is Shakespeare or Hank Williams, the enjoyment you get from their wordplay is a gift from God.

By the way, did you know Hank Williams was called the Hillbilly Shakespeare?

I learned that in Ken Burns’ documentary!

I say all this to get you ready for Psalm 114.

The book of Psalms is a book of song lyrics. This is Hebrew poetry.
Some we know by heart.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me besides the still waters,
He restores my soul.

Psalm 114 we don't know as well.

What's it about? When Israel went out from Egypt.

It's about the Exodus. It's about the Lord bringing the Israelite people out of slavery in Egypt and through the Red Sea and it's about all their time in the desert until they crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

The Bible tells the history of the Exodus in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and part of Joshua.

In those very long books you can read all about Moses and Aaron and Pharaoh and Joshua and about how the Israelites grumbled and complained against God and how they wanted to go back to Egypt, and about everything that happened good and bad in the 40 years it took them to get to the Promised Land.

This Psalm tells that whole story in eight verses.

It does so without mentioning any of the sins of Israel or anything bad they did, and without mentioning Moses or Pharaoh or any of the human players at all.

Instead it imagines the landscape where those things happened coming alive.

A sea and a river running away from God in fear.

Mountains and hills skipping with delight before God.

It's exuberant. It's lovely. It's fun. It's poetry. And it's not just any poetry.

This is the inspired Word of God. There's eternal life in this poem.

At this point I usually say: Let's look at this under three points for note-takers.

But I'm not going to do that today.

Let's play.

Let's take this Psalm as it comes to us and explore it line by line.

Let's trust the Holy Spirit to bring to our minds connections we might not otherwise make so that in the end we see Jesus.

Keep your Bible open and stay with me.

This is a very tightly written Psalm.

It has four stanzas and each stanza is made up of two parallel couplets.

Whoever wrote this worked on it a long time to get it so balanced.
You'll see that as we go through it.

Stanza 1 (Verses 1 and 2)

When Israel went out from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,
Judah became his sanctuary, Israel his dominion.

Israel and the house of Jacob are two different ways of referring to the Hebrews.

After Jacob wrested with the Angel of the Lord, God gave him another name.

He gave him the name Israel.

So his descendents called themselves Israel, but sometimes the house of Jacob.

The Israelites left Egypt, but why is Egypt called a people of strange language?

Obviously the Israelites spoke Hebrew. The Egyptians spoke Egyptian.

But of all the ways Egypt could be described, why this?

Why doesn't it say something like Israel left Egypt, the land of slavery?

Or Israel left Egypt, the kingdom of Pharaoh?

Because it's poetry. And poetry forces us to think in different directions.

Would it be harder to be slaves in a country where your slave masters spoke a
different language? Yes, it would be harder in a lot of ways.

If the people in power speak a language that's hard for you to understand,
then you're automatically marginalized. They are the cultured, educated ones.

They mock your language and speech. You don't have a voice, as we would say.

It would make you feel that much more helpless in your slavery.

For over 400 years the Hebrew people were slaves to the Egyptians.

Hard labor. Physical cruelty. Generational slavery.

It was so bad that they referred to Egypt as the iron furnace.

But on Passover night, God inflicted the 10th Plague on Egypt.

The destroying angel killed all the firstborn sons of Egypt.

Pharaoh called Moses in the middle of the night and told Hebrews to leave.

God struck their Egyptian neighbors with fear and awe so they gave the Israelites
everything—clothing, jewelry, gold.

This nation of slaves marched out of Egypt with wealth and freedom.

But they received an even greater honor. That's the focus of the next line.

Judah became his sanctuary, Israel his dominion.

God's sanctuary is where he dwells and is worshipped.

God's dominion is where he rules.

But isn't God everywhere, and doesn't he rule everywhere? Yes.
In Exodus 19 there's a verse where the Lord says all the earth belongs to him,
but he has made Israel his kingdom of priests.
What do priests do? They represent God to other people.

God took a nation of slaves who did not have a voice, and he made those slaves his
mouthpiece. That was Israel's mission.

God told them: I'm going to give you my word, and you are going to represent
me to all the pagan nations around you. You are going to be a light to Gentiles.
And as you fulfill that mission, I will be preparing you to be the cradle in which
the Savior of the world will be born.

He will extend his sanctuary and his dominion to all nations.

If you're a Christian, God has delivered you from slavery to sin and death.

That means more than just being forgiven.

He's made you his sanctuary and his dominion.

He dwells in you by his Holy Spirit and extends his rule in this world through
you as you speak his word. Have you thought of it that way?

When you teach Sunday school to children, when you share a Bible verse with
someone or speak to them and point to Christ, you're extending his worship
and reign.

So what's next?

Stanza 2 (Verses 3 and 4)

The sea looked and fled; Jordan turned back.

The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs.

What's this about?

The sea looked and fled. That's the parting of the Red Sea.

Pharaoh's army chased them and God told Moses to hold his staff over the sea, the water parted, Israel went through on dry ground, the Egyptians followed and were drowned. So when Israel stepped out, they were truly free.

Jordan turned back. This is the parting of the Jordan River.

At the end of the 40 years of wilderness wandering, after the rebellious generation had all died, God told Joshua to tell the Levites carrying the ark of the covenant to step into the Jordan River. When they did, it stopped flowing upstream, and the Israelites crossed over into the Promised Land.

The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs.

This is not as clear, but it's the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai.

When God's glory came down, one of the manifestations massive earth quake.

It says the whole mountain was trembling.

So that's what this stanza is referring to historically, but let's play a little.

Why is it out of chronological order?

The order it happened was Red Sea first, then Sinai, then after 40 years, Jordan.

But the Psalm writer takes the two water events and links them together, even though they are actually separated by a long, hard history.

He makes the water events stand for Israel's whole experience.

When you start to think about what these two water events have come to symbolize for believers, it makes sense.

Going through the Red Sea has become a symbol of being saved.

That's what it was for Israelites. When walked through, saved. Enemies gone.

Crossing the Red Sea was a baptism for the nation of Israel. Paul in 1 Cor.

The Red Sea water didn't save. Baptism water doesn't save. God saves.

But that was the significant time and event when it happened.

What has crossing the Jordan River come to symbolize of for believers?

Dying and going to heaven.

We often sing that hymn:

On Jordan's stormy bank I stand and cast a wistful eye,

at Canaan's fair and happy land, where my possessions lie.

Why was it stormy? Because the Bible says it was springtime. River at flood stage.

It was scary. It was impossible to cross over and not be drowned.

But God stopped the flow of the River so his people crossed over.

This is beautiful. Think about your life as a Christian.

Your whole life is just two important water events.

The day you were saved and crossed the Red Sea into freedom,

and the day you die and cross the Jordan River into heaven.

Compared to those two events, the years of trouble in between are nothing.

Our last funeral here at Christ Covenant was John Hasenbein's.

We celebrated his two water events. His salvation and his home-going.

It's going to be the same with all of you who are in Christ.

So what about this other event, the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai?

It's described as the mountains skipping like rams, the hills like lambs.

The sea and river were afraid of God and fled from him.

But the mountains and hills weren't afraid. They were excited he was there.

They were hopping all around, feeling very frisky.

I think this poetic image shows that for believers, God's law is a good thing.

For unbelievers God's moral law is a terrifying thing. It condemns them to hell.

But for believers God's law shows us how to love God and how to love other

people and even how to love ourselves.

I wish we could explore that, but we have to keep moving to the next stanza.

Stanza 3 (Verses 5 and 6)

What ails you, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back?
O mountains, that you skip like rams? O hills, like lambs?

The Psalm writer speaks to the sea and river and the mountains and hills and makes fun of them for reacting this way to the presence of God.

Imagine a bully who likes to hurt people and he's running away from someone stronger and you shout at him: Why are you running, tough guy?

Imagine someone who is usually very reserved getting so excited about seeing an important person that he starts hopping around and acting silly.

And you start teasing him: Hey, Mr. Cool, why are you acting so silly?
That's the feel of this stanza. He's trash-talking.

What are we supposed to do with this? Let me point out a clue that's easy to miss.

This stanza doesn't say:

O sea, why did you flee? O Jordan, why did you turn back?

O mountains and hills, why did you skip?

It's not past tense. It's present tense.

Some English Bible translations miss this and they put it in past tense.

I'm reading from the ESV this morning because it gets this right.

The Psalm writer is not referring to those historical events that took place back then.

He's referring to things that are happening in his own time.

He's seeing seas and rivers part and mountains and hills shake.

He's seeing this with his own eyes, and it's making him brave.

Because he connects what he's seeing now to what God did back then when he brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt.

On Friday of this week I ran into Bill Heinz.

Bill started the Foundry in Bessemer which we know so well here in Cullman through the work of the Foundry Farm out in Holly Pond.

For those of you who don't know what the Foundry is, it's a Christian addiction recovery ministry.

Several years ago Bill came to Christ Covenant and gave his testimony.

He was enslaved to drugs and alcohol until the Lord saved him.

And in the decades since then, this is the work he's committed his life to.

When I saw Bill, Psalm 114 was on my mind, and I wondered,

how many times has this man seen seas flee and rivers turn back?

I've only seen one dramatic conversion in my life, I'm sure Bill has seen many.

Men and women enslaved, and then God claims them and makes them his sanctuary and his dominion and the Red Sea parts and they are saved. And I'm sure Bill has seen many times the law of God become precious to men and women who once despised God's law. Now they're hopping and skipping when they get to study the Bible.

In fact, the place I ran into Bill was at CRMC where he was visiting David Hall who was about to go into surgery. David, who many of you know, is a man who was set free from slavery by God, and now he is a leader at the Foundry and he loves God's word. Talk to David and he's always relating the lives of the men at the Foundry to events in the Bible, to the lives of Abraham and Daniel and Peter and Paul.

And that's something else this stanza makes us realize. The Psalm writer makes these connections with what God has done in the past to what he sees God doing now because he knows the story of redemption. He knows all the Bible stories by heart. They are his stories now.

And this reminds us how utterly important it is to teach the Bible to children. Knowing the Bible stories of how God dealt with men and women back then is the way our covenant children learn to understand life now. They need to know about God parting the Jordan River so the Israelites could cross over to the Promised Land because it will help them understand the death of fellow believers and their own death one day. Knowing what God did in the past emboldens us today.

But it's even better than that. Let's look at the last stanza.

Stanza 4 (Verses 7 and 8)

Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water.

This is the first time God is actually mentioned.

The Psalm writer builds expectation stanza after stanza.

Who is this that brought Israel out of Egypt?

Who is this who made the sea flee and the mountains dance?

Of course we know all along it's God but the way he avoids mentioning God by name until the very end is very artistic.

So what's the last great act the Psalm writer chooses to highlight?

What does God do that is so great that the whole earth should tremble?

Well, this is very interesting. It says the God of Jacob

Turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water

Do you know what that's referring to?

There were two times during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness that the Israelites ran out of water and almost died of thirst.

The first time happened soon after the Red Sea.

They were at a place called Horeb, near Mt. Sinai, and they came to Moses and said we're going to die and our flocks and herds are going to die.

There was a huge rock there, an enormous boulder at the base of the mountain, and God told Moses to strike the rock with his staff.

He did and water gushed out.

There were 600,000 men of military age among the Israelites, so that means the total number of people was several million, plus all their livestock.

This wasn't a trickle. It was a torrent of water.

Now fast-forward almost 20 years.

There was another crisis at a place called Kadesh and the people complained and blamed Moses, they said they were going to die of thirst in the desert.

There was a large rock at this location too, and the Lord told Moses not to strike the rock like the last time, but to speak to it and water would come out.

But Moses was so angry at the people that he said:

Listen you rebels, do I have to get water for you again? And he struck the rock.

Water came out again like the first time.

But God told Moses, because you struck rock, you can't enter Promised Land.

That seems like a harsh a penalty for what Moses did,

but Paul helps us understand a deeper theological point.
He says the Israelites drank from the spiritual Rock, that Rock was Christ.
The Rock in the desert that gave water foreshadowed the Messiah.
And for Jesus Christ to give us eternal life, he only had to be struck once.
His one sacrifice on the cross was perfect and complete.
All we need now to get living water from him is to speak to him.
Just ask him like the Samaritan woman at the well, and he will give it.

And when Christ brings his living water out of hard, flinty hearts,
the world trembles.
Sometimes it trembles in amazement, sometimes in rage,
but the world trembles because it sees the Lord, the God of Jacob.

There was a scene in a Dallas courtroom this week that went viral.
I'm sure you've seen it.
Christian man named Brandt Jean, forgiving and embracing his brother's killer.
The world is used to victim impact statements where people say things like:
I hope you rot in hell.
What they witnessed instead was water from a rock. A spring of water from flint.
The supernatural work of Christ in the heart of a man who was in the desert.
And the world trembled, some in amazement and some in rage.
But what the world could not do was ignore the presence of the God of Jacob.

Jesus Christ can do the same in your life.
Are you bitter and cynical about a person or situation?
Are you discontented and unhappy?
Are you fearful? Anxious?
Ask the Lord for relief, look to him in expectation.

You can do that right now as we come to him at his Table.