

Ancient Praise

October 17, 2004

Which in his times he shall shew, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen. (1Ti 6:15-16)

Ancient cultures often referred to their supreme rulers as “king of kings and lord of lords.” Some Greek writers referred the title to Zeus. To leave no doubt in the minds of Timothy or others who might read his letter, Paul added a word to emphasize God’s exclusive role as the one and only “Lord of lords and King of kings.” In this role God has no competition. D. A. Carson suggests that these two verses may well have originated as a first generation Christian hymn, quoted here by Paul. “Indeed the whole doxology has the appearance of a Christian hymn which Paul is quoting.”^{11[1]} Contemporary worship hymns should follow the example of this and other possible New Testament quotations from the church’s first hymns of worship (Another example believed to be either a quote from a first generation hymn or a first generation confession of faith is 1Ti 3:16.). We throw around terms and titles far too loosely. How easily the words, “our Lord Jesus Christ,” flow from our lips, but how faithfully do our words and walk prove that Jesus is in fact our Lord and that we fully submit to Him and to His sovereign lordship over our lives? We cannot call Him “Lord” and refuse to submit to His rule over our lives. Such conduct would be fully as disrespectful as claiming allegiance to a king or civil government and then refusing to pay taxes or perform other legally binding obligations. In the case of a civil governor you would face immediate prosecution for breaking the law, hardly a credible testimony to your empty pledge of loyalty. In the case of the kingdom of God the judgment for failure to honor God may not appear as visibly, but they no less occur and are administered with infallible certainty.

What does Paul intend by the leading clause, “Which in his times he shall shew”? For faithful believers now, the fact of God’s supreme lordship and sovereignty are precious truths. When shall this truth be fully known by all? Paul clearly emphasizes a future epochal time when the fact partially known by faithful believers shall be known by all thinking beings in the whole universe.

“Who only hath immortality...” In other passages Paul refers to believers as receiving at some future time a portion of immortality. For example (1Co 15:53-54), in the resurrection our “mortal” bodies shall put on “immortality.” Again Carson makes a good point. “The use of the word *immortal* for God has already appeared in 1Ti 1:17. Is Paul implying that no-one else has immortality? He seems to mean that God alone is inherently immortal, whereas all other immortality is derived.”^{12[2]} No other being in all of God’s creation possesses underived immortality. God alone claims the attribute ontologically. We shall derive it from Him in the resurrection.

Notice the next description ascribed to God, “...dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto.” Often in Scripture light seems to be used as an analogy for either God’s glory or for the light of knowledge. In this case unapproachable light seems to be a reference to His glory. Most contemporary theological teaching falls short of this holy and glorious description of God. All who teach any form of synergistic (God and you cooperating in accomplishing your salvation) salvation diminish God incredibly, not only in their assessment of His weakness in failing to accomplish His supposed desire to save all humanity, but also in His almost “buddy” informal approachableness. The lost sinner is told to pray a certain prayer, to say certain words, to simply talk to God with grief over his/her sins, and God obligates Himself to respond. According to Paul in this passage, God in His glory cannot be approached by mortal man under any circumstance. We might ask, “How then can anyone approach God?” Scripture gives the answer. “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me.” (Joh 6:44-45).

The answer affirms God's true lordship, His sovereignty, over all. We do not approach Him; He approaches us and draws us to Himself. I find it somewhat amazing that advocates of the synergistic systems of salvation so fiercely defend the bastion of their doctrine. Man's will must be free. Even God cannot be allowed to violate man's free will. However, at almost every logical juncture of their teaching, their doctrine repeatedly violates God's will. Which is more sacred? Which is more inviolable, God's will or man's? Although Paul is here affirming God's glory, his words also affirm the glorious truth that appears throughout Scripture regarding God's sovereignty in our salvation.

Paul has still more to say about God's glory, "...whom no man hath seen nor can see." Scripture affirms that natural man is sufficiently intelligent to reason from the evidence of God in creation to the fact that this universe didn't accidentally come into being as we know it today. The basic Christian argument for the existence of God from design builds on the fact. You look at the material universe and see such profound evidence of intelligent design that you must conclude that an intelligent Designer created it. From that point you reason that the designer of the universe must be so powerful that no being exists, or even could exist, greater than He. Therefore He is God.

Paul's teaching here does not conflict with this truth regarding man's inherent or intelligent ability to reason the existence of God from the design of nature. While the unregenerate, or unsaved, man may reason from the design of nature to the existence of God as Creator, he will remain oblivious to any spiritual significance of God as Savior. Paul affirms this truth strongly (1Co 2:11-14). A natural man cannot comprehend the personal, saving, redeeming character of God. He cannot know it; he does not possess the ability to comprehend this truth. This truth exists within the unapproachable light in which God exists, and which is described by Paul in our study passage. Unregenerate man can neither approach God nor see Him in this aspect of His holy and saving nature.

Paul's conclusion arrives at its only logical point. God alone deserves—and shall surely receive—"honour and power everlasting." How often do you hear the advocates of synergistic salvation boast about how highly rewarded they expect to be in heaven for their good works performed while living on earth? They expect to wear crowns on their heads, often giving voice to their selfish ambition to have more stars in their crown than other lesser believers. Such a self-glorifying attitude begs to be confronted with the obvious question. "What about the glory that Christ is to receive in heaven?" "How can you focus so intensely on your own glory in heaven and find the time, much less the inclination, to give any honor or glory to Him?"

We should plead with those who advocate these ideas to set aside their crowns and begin now to exercise the attitudes and habits that they shall enjoy perfectly in heaven, casting their crowns before the Lord Jesus Christ and falling before Him in worship, crying out His merit of all glory and honor throughout eternity.

"Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." (Re 4:11)

"And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth." (Re 5:9-10)

Will you join me in unselfish and unrestrained worshipful praise to Him alone? Will you set aside selfish ambition to parade heaven's streets with more stars in your crown than someone else has? Praise Him who alone deserves—and shall receive—heaven's praise.

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