

## **“The Maker is in Charge!”**

**Psalm 33:1-22**

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**The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

### **Psalm 33: Text Comment**

- v.2 Details such as references to these instruments place the psalms in their historical context. Archaeological confirmation of such details is commonplace. The two instruments, among others, would have accompanied the congregation’s singing. This is a psalm of praise to be sung by the congregation.
- v.3 Throughout the Bible “new” refers not to something chronologically recent but to something that partakes of the new life that God gives to those who are being saved. The fact that “new” appears so often in the “Old” Testament should make us hesitate before thinking that spiritual realities were different then.
- v.5 The four words in vv. 4 and 5 provide an outline for the rest of the hymn: word, work, righteousness, and love.
- v.6 Vv. 6-9 concern the word of God. As in Genesis, God speaks, and it is so.
- v.10 Vv. 10-12 concern the work of God. He infallibly brings his plans to pass.
- v.13 Vv. 13-17 concern the Lord’s righteousness or justice, the basis in the Bible not only of the condemnation of the sinful, but the salvation of those who trust in the Lord. Note the recurring use of “all” in vv. 13-15. The Lord’s knowledge and control is absolute.
- v.17 Voltaire’s famous jibe, “They say that God is always for the big battalions” is here denied. We’ve seen too many of the mighty fall to believe they will always succeed!
- v.18 Vv. 18-22 concern the Lord’s love. This is the believer’s confidence; God will not forsake those he loves.

As you know very well, we are living in an increasingly unbelieving culture; a culture in which not only has the consciousness of God receded from the minds of most people but in which the actual denial of God’s existence has become commonplace. This is especially the case in the elite culture, the culture that is shaping our social thought and life. As the years have passed, it has seemed to me more and more important that preachers in our society take care to help their people maintain firm and confident convictions about God; that I help you to see not only how reasonable our convictions are, but how unreasonable is the denial of God’s existence, how utterly unlikely to be true, no matter how confidently unbelief in God is now expressed. It is in the Psalms that we read that “the fool says in his heart that there is no God.” And in a great many Psalms we are given, by the by, the arguments that buttress belief in God. Psalm 33 is such a psalm. One fine commentator on the Psalms entitles this psalm “Maker and Monarch.” [Kidner, i, 136] The editors of the *ESV* take for the title of the psalm the last phrase of verse 5: “the

steadfast love of the Lord.” But the point of the psalm is that this divine steadfast love is demonstrated in creation and in providence. It is a psalm about God’s nature and work.

You perhaps noticed that the statement that God had created the world in vv. 6-9 is immediately followed by the assertion of his absolute control over what happens in the world for the blessing and benefit of those who trust in him. The fact that “by the word of the Lord the heavens were made and by the breath of his mouth all their host” and the fact that “The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations” are simply two facets of the same reality. This world, what is in it, what happens in it, is all the plan, purpose, and work of a single, almighty, perfectly self-consistent mind.

Creation – God’s making all things – and providence – God’s ruling over all things, your history and the history of the world – are intimately related at a deep level throughout the Bible as they are in this psalm. This is demonstrated in another interesting way that would have immediately drawn the attention of a Hebrew reader of this psalm. In v. 7 we read that the Lord “gathers the waters of the sea as a heap...” This language is an echo both of the creation account in Genesis 1 *and* of the deliverance of Israel by the parting of the waters of the Sea of Reeds (Ex. 15:8). It is the same God, the same power, the same all-consuming divine will at work in both instances. He created the sea, and he controls it for the blessing and benefit of his people and the accomplishment of his will. [cf. Craigie, *WBC*, i, 273]

“God’s dominion in creation and in human history are intimately related.” [*Ibid*] The one is the continuation of the other. The former is the presupposition of the latter. God rules this world because it is his, he made it. He can rule over all things in the world because the very existence of the world and everything in it is the result of God’s will in the first place. God can part the waters of the sea because they are *his* waters, he made them, and they are in the nature of the case under his control.

We tend to forget when we argue about creation as a matter of scientific debate in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century that what is at stake is the Lord’s rule of history. If God did not make the world, the nexus, the connection between creation and providence is broken. It would be hard to believe that God rules a world he did not make and controls a world that is not *his*. It is precisely for this reason that our elite culture and its mandarins are so determined to deny the existence of God. They do not want there to be a God capable of creating this universe *precisely because such a God would inevitably rule this universe*. Their motivations are not scientific, they are spiritual. They are not seekers after truth; they are seekers after freedom from the rule of God. They deny God because they do not want him to exist. The more forthcoming of their spokesmen will even admit this.

One of the most interesting stories of intellectual life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century concerns a man named Antony Flew. He was the Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens of the previous generation. During the years of my youth and young and middle adulthood, Flew was not only a widely read philosopher who taught at a number of the world’s most prestigious universities, but was something of an atheist pit bull. He had a penchant for publicly challenging religious thinking and sentiment at its most popular points: denying the possibility of life after death, the meaningfulness of human life, the existence of right and wrong as absolute realities, and so on.

In a 1950 paper entitled “Theology and Falsification,” Flew argued that theological statements must, in the nature of the case, die the death of a thousand qualifications. When a Christian claims, for example, that God loves us, he must also make almost endless qualifications to accommodate all the evidence to the contrary. So, an assertion such as we have in v. 5 that the “earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord” has to be explained in the teeth of all the trouble that comes upon people, all the injustice in the world, all the heartbreak, and so on. And, said Flew, when all the explanations are given there can be little left of the original statement. Too many qualifications, Flew argued, and a statement becomes incoherent.

In 1976 Flew published his book *The Presumption of Atheism* in which he argued that the concept of God was philosophically indefensible, and that atheism was the only “reasonable” position for a modern mind to hold. That was Antony Flew for fifty years, for virtually his entire and very distinguished career as a philosopher, academic, and author. He would have said, he did say, as does Richard Dawkins today, that he was an intellectually fulfilled atheist and would certainly have assumed that what he had been taught about the origin of life utterly by accident was a *fact* of science, as we are told so often nowadays that it is.

But then in 2007, now an old man but still fully in charge of his intellectual powers, Antony Flew published another book, this entitled: *There is a God*. There had been preparation for this in his reading of theistic, indeed Christian philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga, William Alston, and George Mavrodes. His hard form of atheism had been softening for some time. But what really broke its back was his study of modern science and the discoveries of the natural laws that control the forces of nature. He found the fact that the world was understandable to the human mind harder to account for than he had previously imagined. As Einstein once put it: “The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible.” Flew found it more and more difficult to believe that conscious, purposeful, imaginative, self-reflective beings such as human beings could have evolved out of unconscious and non-purposeful matter.

As an aside, let me remind you that we ought to be making this point emphatically and repeatedly. The gap between human beings and other animals is impossibly large and evolutionists should not be allowed to pretend that it is not. I am reminded of David Berlinski’s witty riposte to some scientist who argued that there was no distinction *in kind* between humans and chimps, only a distinction in degree. Berlinski is not a Christian, but he is a world class mathematician and a philosopher of science. He wrote this in reply:

“No distinction in kind rather than degree between ourselves and chimps? No distinction? Seriously, folks? Here is a simple operational test. The chimpanzees invariably are the ones behind the bars of their cages. There they sit, solemnly munching bananas, searching for lice, aimlessly loping around, baring the gums, waiting for the experiments to begin. No distinction? Chimpanzees cannot read or write; they do not paint, or compose music, or do mathematics; they form no real communities, only loose-knit wandering tribes; they do not dine and cannot cook; there is no record anywhere of their achievements; beyond the superficial, they show little curiosity; they are born, they live, they suffer, and they die.

No distinction? No species in the animal world organizes itself in the complex, dense, difficult fashion that is typical of human societies. There is no such thing as animal culture; animals do not compromise and cannot count; there is not a trace in the animal world of virtually any of the powerful and poorly understood powers and properties of the human mind; in all of history, no animal has stood staring at the night sky in baffled and respectful amazement. The chimpanzees are static creatures, solemnly poking for grubs with their sticks, inspecting one another for fleas. No doubt, they are peaceable enough, if fed, and looking into the warm brown eyes, one can see signs of a universal biological shriek (a nice maneuver that involves hearing what one sees), but what of it?

One may insist, of course, that all this represents a difference merely of degree. Very well. Only a difference of degree separates man from the Canadian goose. Individuals of both species are capable of entering the air unaided and landing some distance from where they started.”

It is this sort of claim – that there is only a difference in kind between human beings and other living things – that Flew began to see as less and less reasonable and more and more a desperate evasion of the obvious. He insists that his pilgrimage to belief in God has been one of reason and not of faith. Nevertheless, the laws of the universe, he now believes, manifest the mind of God. Flew, who spent almost the entirety of his professional life denying the existence of God, from that time until his death called himself a deist, a believer in God and in a personal God. The scientific evidence, he argued, points to an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent intelligence, Aristotle’s first cause.

He did not, however, so far as we know come to believe that God was the loving, just, and holy being described in the Bible. On the other hand, he did not rule out the possibility that God should be such as he is described in Holy Scripture. The final sentence of his book is: “Someday I might hear a Voice that says, ‘Can you hear me now?’”

Now Christians were rightly delighted to see Flew not only prove himself a turncoat to atheism but to abandon his atheism on scientific grounds. We take an understandable pleasure in watching an insider skewer the Darwinian establishment all the more given the fact that Antony Flew’s philosophical sophistication exceeds that of Richard Dawkins or the late Christopher Hitchens by orders of magnitude. Here is an enemy admitting what so many Christian scientists have said: that the steady advances in the understanding of nature and its virtually indescribable complexity have completely worn away the foundations upon which Darwinism has so confidently rested these last 150 years or so. Flew, so to speak, hoisted the scientific establishment on its own petard!

But however glad we may have been for Professor Flew’s change of mind, deism is hardly an acceptable resting point. Professor Flew claimed to have been convinced by the discoveries of science that there must be an omnipotent God, omniscient and omnipresent. Only such a God can account for the universe as we know it and for human life as we observe it. Fair enough. That is a conclusion harder to resist today than it was even 10 or 20 years ago. He was hardly the first skeptic to realize that there must be a God and he won’t be the last. But how is it possible to

believe that the God who created *this* world and *this* human life has no interest in what happens to this world or how human life is lived in it?

If you admit that human life itself is a phenomenon naturalistic science cannot explain, you are admitting that man is himself the direct creation of a personal God. Personhood came from and can only come from personhood; consciousness only from consciousness, morality only from the moral. You are admitting that our love of beauty, our thirst for meaning, our demand for justice, the moral measurement of life, our virtually inconceivable mental power, the power of speech and song, our hunger for relationship, for belonging, for eternity, and human beings' ineradicable need to worship, all that marks, defines and characterizes human life; I say, you are admitting that all of this comes from God! Are we *then* to believe that the God who gave us the capacity to behold and love beauty does not care for the beautiful, that the one who made us to thirst for meaning has no meaning to give us, that the one who made us to be inescapably moral creatures cares nothing for morality, that the one who made love the greatest power and experience of human life does not himself love? Aristotle's first mover is inadequate to account for precisely those things that most have to be explained about human life; the very things that Professor Flew came to believe could not be explained without recourse to an infinite, personal God.

The argument of Psalm 33 is, in this respect, not only the assertion of the Word of God, but altogether the more rational way of thinking about life. If God made the heavens and the earth, if he produced the wonders of nature and the astonishing powers of human life; if he gave human existence its intellectual, moral, spiritual, aesthetic, personal, and relational form, then surely God takes a deep and abiding interest in those very aspects of human life and history. Believe me, as I said, it is precisely because of the inevitability of this connection between creation and providence, between God's making of the world and his ruling of that world, his caring for that world, his judging of that world and his saving of that world, that unbelievers in the elite culture are so rabidly determined to defend the theory of evolution at all costs and to allow no breach anywhere in the dam. They know very well what implications inevitably follow admitting that God created the world. This would be then *his* world, not *ours*; our lives would be his lives, not our own; his law not our laws would be the standard of judgment.

In Isaiah 40 we have another statement like this one in Psalm 33 connecting creation to providence.

“Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

But the next verse indicates that the proper inference from the majesty and order of the heavens is not God's remoteness but his eye for detail.

“Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God?’”

God planned no empty and meaningless universe. As we read in Isa. 45:18, “he planned [the earth] to be inhabited.” He made it as the place where mankind would live, serve him, and commune with him, would be loved by him and love him in return. And so it is here. God’s mighty power and wisdom displayed in the creation is taken as the proof positive that the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, that the people who fear him will be blessed, and that the purposes of those who rebel against him must come to nothing.

I am of a mind to think, knowing the history of science at least in a general way, that the theory of evolution will collapse at some point, perhaps in the not so distant future. The pressure behind the dam is increasing all the while and too many insiders have begun to go public with their doubts. I agree with Malcolm Muggeridge, who once wrote,

“I myself am convinced that the theory of evolution, especially the extent to which it’s been applied, will be one of the great jokes in the history books in the future. Posterity will marvel that so very flimsy and dubious [a] hypothesis could be accepted with the incredible credulity that it has.” [*The End of Christendom*, 59]

But I don’t think that the end of evolution would necessarily mean that the scientific naturalism of the present day in our elite culture will be replaced by Christian faith. It may be just as well replaced by some other explanation designed like all the others precisely to avoid the connection drawn between Creation and Providence in Psalm 33.

It is this very connection – inevitable as it is once the divine creation of the universe, of the world, and of mankind is admitted – the very connection the unbelieving world recoils from, that we believers are to embrace with all our hearts: that God rules over the world that he has made and that he does so with the interests of his people in mind. This life is dark in many ways. It presents us with disappointment and sorrow so often that the Bible itself describes our world as a vale of tears. More than a few times believers are tempted to feel that “the heavens are as brass above them,” that God is not attending to their cries and seems not to care for their suffering. This was, as I said, a fact that once was a foundation of Antony Flew’s atheism. In light of the circumstances of life *how can we know* that “the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord”?

Well, among other reasons, here are two, two proofs, two demonstrations. The first and foremost is the cross. This historical demonstration of God’s love for his people, that he would do anything to save them and restore them to himself. If God did not spare his own son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not, together with him, graciously give us all things? Of course, all things must work together for our good – even the darkest things – if God did not hesitate to send his beloved son to death to secure our eternal happiness.

The other demonstration is the one we are given in Psalm 33 and it is a powerful also. We know God is at work in the world in love and justice, in faithfulness and goodness, because *he made this world, because it is his*, and because his purposes in making it *must therefore be fulfilled* in its history. *He is the infinite, personal God after all!* The God who has left his mark on every one of us.

A world bereft of purpose and meaning *is not* the world that God made. A world bursting at the seams with purpose and meaning *is* the world that God made by the utterance of his word. And a world that God made, a God sufficient to account for this world and for the life of mankind, is a world in which those who love and serve this God, those who trust his Son, must be the objects of his special affection, consideration, and care. *It could not be otherwise!* He is, of course, as this world also demonstrates, a God far, far beyond us in wisdom and power and so a God whose ways must be past finding out by people whose sight and understanding are as limited as our own. Hence all the questions we have about what is happening or not happening in our lives. But such a God as made us to love and care must be a God who himself loves and cares.

Secularism with its denial of God's creation intends to marginalize God in the human mind and heart. That is its aim! And when creation is marginalized, soon providence must be as well, and it becomes hard to believe that this world and this life – with all the sorrow and pain that are churned up in it – are, in fact, the plan and purpose of a God of love and justice. The world is wrenched away from God and sent to seek its own life and explanation within itself. [Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 38] *But there is no explanation to be found within the world itself.* The search for such an explanation is futile. Either the infinite personal God made us, or life is without meaning. But we know, everyone knows, the rankest unbeliever knows, that life is not without meaning; we know, everyone knows that love and longing for more are real things, not simply a biological condition like hunger or a biological process like digestion.

God's creation invests the world and human life in the world with terrible and wonderful meaning. And it assures you and me that God cares for us and has not put love and longing in our hearts and moral judgment in our consciences to mock us, but rather to provide us with an understanding of himself and the confidence to turn to him in hope. And that is just what these believers do at the end of the psalm that begins with Creation and continues with the absolute rule of God over all of history. What does it mean to know that God has made the world by the utterance of his word?

It means that we should wait upon him, our help and our shield, rejoice in him, and trust his holy name and steadfast love. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them!