

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: DRAWING NEAR

(Growing in prayer)

Worship: The Very Best Place to Start! Study #1

(Psalm 145)

Introduction: Of babies and alligators... (Thanks, Lewis Carroll)

The 19th century Englishman, Lewis Carroll,¹ is famous for writing “Alice in Wonderland” and other nonsense books. However, authoring books for kids aged 5-95 was only his hobby. His professional life revolved around teaching mathematics and logic at Cambridge University.

Among Carroll’s more ambitious goals was to train anyone who was interested in using formal logic. The skill of logical thinking would, in his own words, help his students, *“detect fallacies, and tear to pieces the flimsy illogical arguments which you will so continually encounter in books, in newspapers, in speeches, and...in sermons.”*

Chief among the tools he used to teach logic was the categorical syllogism.

A syllogism is a series of two or more propositions followed by an inescapable conclusion drawn from those propositions.

Here is an example of a very simple categorical syllogism.

Proposition 1: All humans are mortal

Proposition 2: I am human

Therefore: I am mortal.

¹ Carroll’s real name was Charles Dodgson. He lived from 1832-1898 and in addition to being an author and teacher, was a deacon in the Anglican Church.

Lewis Carroll’s syllogisms were usually a bit more complicated, and among his simpler (and better known) syllogisms is the following, which starts off with three propositions.

Proposition 1: All babies are illogical.

Proposition 2: Nobody is despised who can manage a crocodile.

Proposition 3: Illogical persons are despised.

The conclusion, drawn from these three statements, is:
Therefore, if it can manage a crocodile, it is not a baby.
(or, “No baby can manage a crocodile.”)

That’s just logical. You gotta love it.

My opening premise today is that we are logical. All of us. Oh, we may not understand formal logic and might not be able to punch our way out of a categorical syllogism. But we are logical.

Again, this is not to say that we don’t all do silly or illogical things from time to time. It is to say that our behaviors are amazingly consistent with our true beliefs, with our world view. The way we behave shows, logically, what we really believe.

If we believe that the start of a New Year is tailor-made for fresh starts, we will make (or have already made) New Year’s resolutions.

If we haven’t made any New Year’s resolutions (and don’t plan to do so), we reveal that we don’t really believe that the start of a new year is a compelling time to start a new diet, exercise program, service project, or spiritual discipline.

It’s logical.

So, given your innate logicity, what is your default response when you are most aware of the needs in your soul, the condition of your friends and loved ones, and the state of the world?

What do you do - logically now - when you are honestly facing the reality that **YOU HAVE LEAST CONTROL OVER THE THINGS IN LIFE THAT CONCERN YOU THE MOST?**

I submit that for most of us, the default response to “need” is to DO. To act.

Get in shape and watch the diet.
 Grab lunch with a friend.
 Vote.
 Apologize.
 Take a course.
 Search the web.
 Support a cause.

Now these are all perfectly reasonable responses to needs. None of them are bad at all. But, I believe that they are all appropriate as *the second thing* to do in response to a need.

As I read the Bible’s stories, trace the lives of its heroes, and listen to its teachings, I hear God calling us to something else *first*. He wants our default response to be an act of NOT-doing. He wants us to instinctively pray.

This morning we are considering prayer. Here on the first Sunday of 2014, we’re looking at first things and putting first things first.

And, given who God is and who we are and what kind of shape our world is in, it makes a lot of sense to pray. It’s just logical. So today, we begin a four week look at *“drawing near”* (Heb. 4:16) to God via prayer.

I’m eager to consider with you a growing life of prayer over these next four Sundays. I am hopeful and prayerful that we will each grow in our knowledge of God and in our prayer life throughout January and on into the rest of 2014.

These messages will come absent brow-beating. *“You should”* and *“You ought to”* and *“You better”* will be missing during the four weeks of our time thinking about prayer together.²

² I learned long ago that there are three questions a pastor can ask which are virtually guaranteed to prompt guilt: (1). Are you witnessing enough? (2). Are you reading your Bible enough? and (3). Are you praying enough? Answer: No. More pertinent question: “Are you growing in prayer?”

I am, of course, desperately hoping and praying that God will use our times together in January to spark a revival of fervor for God and for prayer in our lives and in our church.

But, since we’re not going to resort to shame-based guilt motivations (Scripture doesn’t so we won’t, either), I’m relying on two huge ideas - both rooted in Scripture - to prompt us to pray:

(1). *It only makes sense, given who we are and who God is, to pray.*
 That’s right, I’m going to play the “logic” card. I may not have much to offer by way of categorical syllogisms, but I will be reminding you (and of course, myself!) repeatedly that God is worthy of praise, that we are in need of confession, that prayer is a reasonable response to need, and that it makes great sense to speak the language of prayer with each other.

(2). *God is inviting us to know Him and His power through the practice of prayer.*

Few truths prompt prayer more than the knowledge that Almighty God is listening when we pray. He wants us to pray. He’s not bored when we pray. He welcomes us into His presence! And we’ll rehearse that truth repeatedly during January. We’ll focus on the idea that God, who made us loves to hear from us.

An Introduction to Psalm 145...

The guide for our first journey into a prayer life that has us *“drawing near”* is King David, a man described in Scripture as a man after God’s own heart - and what a full life David lived!

David was anointed to become a king while he was a teenager. But it would be ten long years before David sat on the throne. A giant was killed and a wife was married and a best friend was lost before David became king.

Once he sat on the throne in Jerusalem, David made a great start, leading Israel into military and political prominence in the Middle Eastern world as he also walked with God.

Then, tragically, after that great start, David took a mid-life fall. He forgot God, took a woman who was married to another man, and then had the woman’s husband murdered on the field of battle.

Awful stuff!

And yet, while David foolishly forgot God, God didn't forget David. He brought David to repentance, disciplined him severely, washed him from guilt and sin, and even restored him to the throne and to a vibrant faith walk.

During the latter years of his reign, David's life settled into a stable routine, giving the now older and wiser king a chance to reflect on his life.

What we have before us this morning is a collection of David's late-in-life reflections on the worship of God. When we come to Psalm 145, we are barging in on King David's prayer time. He is drawing near to God.

If a Jew in David's day had written a Psalm about David, he might have begun with *"I will extol Thee, David, O King!"*

We listen as King David addresses God, the KING!

Worshipping God TODAY (vv. 1-2)

*[1] I will extol You, my God, O King,
Every day I will bless Your name forever and ever.*

*[2] Every day I will bless You,
And I will praise Your name forever and ever.*

If David, the king, has learned one lesson in his life it is this: He reigns as sovereign under the Sovereignty of a greater KING of kings!

Because the Jews of the Old Testament lived under a monarchy, they were at something of an advantage over us Americans when it comes to worship.

Living in a representative form of democracy (an arrangement for which I am quite grateful) reduces our capacity to appreciate God's Sovereign Kingship.

When we read, **"O King"** in our Bibles, we don't react emotionally the way the subject of a monarchy does, today, or the way that an ancient Jew, living in the time of King David, did.

When that ancient Jew entered the throne room of his king, or when the king entered the place where she or he was, there was an immediate recognition that they were in the presence of one who had the power to bless or to curse, to grant life or condemn to death as he saw fit.

Likewise, when it came time to worship, they understood that they were in the presence of One greater than themselves.

David, the king of Israel "got it." And the fact that he "got it" prompted him to make a solemn promise: Every day he is going to bless and praise God.

Worship will be his preoccupation. Not soon. Not when it is convenient.

"Every day I will bless You."

Starting...Now!

Ever wonder what David's worship looked like? Listen. He begins with head-scratching praise.

Worshipping God for His Greatness! (vv. 3-7)

God's Greatness: Unsearchable (v. 3)

***[3] Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised,
And His greatness is unsearchable.***

God is SO great, so awesome, that David is stumped when he sits down to try and figure out God and His ways!

These days, there are lots of things that are "stump worthy."

- The phones we carry around in our pockets are wonderful devices - but understand them? Forget it!
- The cars we drive are great to get around in. But, figure them out? Not me.

- The universe around us has been exposed by our telescopes and space stations and deep space probes. We are constantly searching out the mysteries of space. But who among us could say that they “get” the vastness of the universe?
- The universe within is just as unsearchable. Microscopes reveal details at the cellular level. Atomic microscopes reveal the atomic and sub-atomic worlds. We don’t “get” that, either.

When we follow King David’s lead and consider the God who created the universe and everything in it, the God who set in place all of the physical laws with a word, we confess, like David did, that God’s ways are unsearchable, inscrutable, unfathomable, and incomprehensible.

And David’s just getting warmed up.

He continues, envisioning how worship might be expressed in a public setting. The picture he paints is intriguing, in large part because it is inter-generational.

Inter-Generational Praise to God (v. 4)

*[4] One generation shall praise Your works to another,
And shall declare Your mighty acts.*

Yes, grandparents and great-grandparents are declaring God’s works to the younger generations. Yes, moms and dads are speaking to their kids about God’s works.

But it works the other way around, too!

David envisions a scene where the young ones share what they know about God and His works with the older ones.

There has been a good amount of that around here lately - and there will be more! We had a delightful Christmas nativity play - starring children. Teenagers sometimes lead us in worship. Kids take part in receiving the weekly offering. Whole families worship together.

Beautiful inter-generational worship.

Inter-generational worship happens around dinner tables in homes, too, when parents and kids pray and read Scripture and talk about God.

David next moves to mention a practice he is going to engage in - and regularly.

God’s Glorious Splendor (v. 5)

*[5] On the glorious splendor of Your majesty
And on Your wonderful works, I will meditate.*

The thought behind “meditation” is that we take a thought, an idea, and spend time exploring its meaning and its personal implications. It means “to muse.”

That’s not why we go to Fiesta Texas and Sea World. We freely admit that theme parks are places where we put our intellects on hold. It is not for nothing that they are called “a-musement parks.”

But the worship of God is not a-musing. Worship is, by definition, a thoughtful, intellectually engaging, mind-expanding experience.³

When it comes to meditating on and musing about God’s “*majesty*” and His “*wonderful works*,” we are to take a truth about God that is revealed in the Bible and think about it. We are to grab an event that is recorded in the Bible and reflect on it - until we see God for the great and awesome God He is.

Try it. Make a meditation date with God this week. Give yourself a few minutes, an hour - or more! - to a thoughtful reflection on God’s Person and works until His majesty overwhelms you.

If we will pursue the path of thoughtful meditation - as King David did - we will come to know the Lord as David did!

As the first stanza of the psalm comes to a close, it is impossible to miss the exciting corporate aspect of praise to God David imagines.

³ In sharp contrast to what is in view in some religions, the Bible’s take on meditation is of something mentally robust.

Talking about God's Greatness with Each Other (vv. 6-7)

*[6] Men shall speak of the power of Your awesome acts,
And I will tell of Your greatness.*

*[7] They shall eagerly utter the memory of Your abundant goodness
And will shout joyfully of Your righteousness.*

David is star struck with God! This is hero worship, plain and simple.

We in San Antonio are familiar with hero worship. Spurs fans cheer for Timmy, Tony, and Manu - and now Kawhi and Marco.

Today, the stars of the sports and entertainment world, along with business gurus and politicians enjoy hero status. We place them on pedestals and we even lament that they are *"treated as if they are God."*

King David is calling us to engage in "Hero worship" of God!

"Can you believe what He did? The Red Sea parted and the Israelites just walked right through it! The walls of Jericho fell down flat! The Shekinah glory filled the Tabernacle! Elijah prayed, and God sent down fire from heaven to consume the sacrifices! Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead!"

And on and on and on we could go.

Sometime this week pause and reflect on your past. Think of times when you have seen God's work in your life, in your soul, in your friend's life. Praise Him for it. Treat God with the rock-star/hero worship status He deserves. Put Him up - all alone! - on a pedestal where He belongs!

We cultivate hearts that jump to prayer and worship when we rehearse the themes of God's greatness with each other.

We move to the second stanza of this psalm and find David highlighting another facet of God's character - His amazing grace.

Worshipping God for His Grace! (vv. 8-13)

Reflecting on God's Mercy (vv. 8-9)

*[8] The Lord is gracious and merciful;⁴
Slow to anger and great in lovingkindness.*

*[9] The Lord is good to all,
And His mercies are over all His works.*

In these two verses, we find three of the most important words in the Hebrew language. The words are "grace" "mercy" and "lovingkindness."⁵

In the Old Testament book of Judges we find the nation of Israel chronically involved in idolatry, immorality and spiritual rebellion. And time after time after time after time (!) God comes to His people's rescue, delivering them from trouble as soon as they cry out - simply because He loves them.

Outside of Scripture, I believe that the best place to find a graphic illustration of God's outpouring of grace, mercy and loyal love is the mirror.

When I look closely at the man in the mirror, I see a glorious wreck. Redeemed by flawed.

My good intentions are crushed by half-hearted follow-throughs. My faith falters, my hope is small, my love weakens under pressure. When you take an honest look in the mirror, what do you see?

When we see our own weaknesses, we also see our need to return to God for grace, mercy, and love - gifts that He unfailingly gives.

⁴ A closely related Hebrew word is a mother's "womb," the tender place of safety where a child grows and is nurtured until birth.

⁵ Grace (*chanan*) describes a blessing given by a superior to an inferior who has no real right to blessing. Mercy (*racham*) refers to a deep love, one rooted in a natural bond. Lovingkindness (*chesed*) describes God's commitment to deal with His people in loyal love, especially in light of the covenant into which He has entered with them.

And when we reflect on God's incredible grace, we are prompted - as David was - to worship.

Blessing God for His Marvelous Works (vv. 10-12)

*[10] All Your works shall give thanks to You, O Lord,
And Your godly ones shall bless You.*

*[11] They shall speak of the glory of Your kingdom
And talk of Your power;*

*[12] To make known to the sons of men Your mighty acts
And the glory of the majesty of Your kingdom.*

That's worship. People who are taken with God's grace, worship. Period. (Conversely, people who are not taken with the enormity and wonder of His grace poured out on their behalf generally don't worship.)

Again, it's a logic thing.

When our hearts are full of an understanding of God's great grace and of His mighty works, we feel as if we'll burst if we don't shout it out loud.⁶

David continues with this praise-fest, remembering God's royal reign over the earth's kingdoms.

Affirming God's Everlasting Kingdom (v. 13)

The kingdoms of this world are short-lived dominions. Think of the great empires that have existed in the world's history.

- The Babylonian and Assyrian Empires lasted a couple of hundred years each. Likewise for the Persians.

⁶ Gratitude for grace received from God must be expressed. Consider these words from C.S. Lewis: "It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed. It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not to be able to tell anyone how good he is; to come suddenly, at the turn of the road, upon some mountain valley of unexpected grandeur and then to have to keep silent because the people with you care for it no more than for a tin can in the ditch; to hear a good joke and find no one to share it with." (from *Reflections on the Psalms*, p. 95)

- The Greeks were a world dominating military power little longer than the lifespan of Alexander the Great.
- The mighty Roman Empire was powerful for only about 400 years.
- The greatest of the Chinese dynasties survived in the hundreds of years.
- Our American experiment has lasted less than 250 years.

Our political maps are temporary things. One day they line the borders of countries. The next day, they line bird cages. The Soviet Union was dismantled by internal pressures after 75 years. African borders are redefined monthly. By contrast,

*[13] Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
And Your dominion endures throughout all generations.*

Yes, David is a king. But God is the Sovereign KING over all!

Thus far, David has worshipped God for His unsearchable greatness and for His mighty acts in history. He has worshipped God for His mercy and goodness and grace.

When we turn to the third section of this psalm we find David worshipping God for His abundant provision.

Those who experience hardship and suffering need special provisions, and David mentions them first.

Worshipping God for His Provision! (vv. 14-16)

God Helps the Weak and Failing (v. 14)

*[14] The Lord sustains all who fall
And raises up all who are bowed down.*

If anyone knew anything about falling, it's David. He had firsthand experience in falling from high places. He fell (rather, jumped!) into sexual immorality and then into plotting and scheming, and, ultimately, murder.

News Flash! People still fall! I do and so do you. Perhaps into pits of sexual immorality and violence, like David did.

But there are other pits into which we might fall: the pit of self-pity, the pit of careless gossip, the pit of cheating for self advancement, and the pit of sins against love.

King David knew about the dangers of falling. He also knew that God is able to raise up those who fall.

In the centuries since David fell and was raised up, God has proven Himself gracious by raising up fallen people over and over and over again.

- He raised up Simon Peter after his fall on the night of Jesus' betrayal.
- He raised up the apostle Paul, ending Paul's career of killing Christians.
- He raised up John Mark after his cowardly retreat from danger in ministry.

And, brothers and sisters, take courage. When you fail, God is able to raise you up, too!

There is hope for the falling and for the fallen, because there is a gracious God in Heaven who *"sustains all who fall."*

So, God provides restoration - and more.

God Provides for the Needs of All (vv. 15-16)

*[15] The eyes of all look to You,
And You give them their food in due time.*

*[16] You open Your hand
And satisfy the desire of every living thing.*

When the chips are down and our backs are against the wall and it's fourth and long and the clock is running down and the pressure is on and we've run out of options, where will we turn?

Where else can we turn but to God?

King David says that when we turn to Him, God *"opens His hand"* to supply what we need.

God is a giver. And just as Jesus' hands never came up empty when He reached into the basket to draw out food for the five thousand, so God gives us what we need - even if it is not what we think we need or what we think we want - when we pray.

In the final paragraph of Psalm 145, David unearths a final facet of God's nature that moves him to worship: His righteousness.

Worshipping God for His Righteousness! (vv. 17-20)

*[17] The Lord is righteous in all His ways
And kind in all His deeds.*

*[18] The Lord is near to all who call upon Him,
To all who call upon Him in truth.*

*[19] He will fulfill the desire of those who fear Him;
He will also hear their cry and will save them.*

*[20] The Lord keeps all who love Him,
But all the wicked He will destroy.*

We just listened to a powerful wedding of thoughts. GOD IS RIGHTEOUS IN ALL HIS WAYS AND KIND IN ALL HIS DEEDS.

Righteousness without kindness is coldhearted scorekeeping. Kindness without righteousness is sentimental mush. But, when the two are married, there is strength and beauty!

When David combined righteousness and kindness, he might have been thinking of the sacrificial system of his day.

On the one hand, God's righteousness was demonstrated in His demand for the shedding of blood for the remission of sin. On the other hand, God's kindness was seen in His forgiveness of the one who faithfully offered that sacrifice.

But when we, today, think about the marriage of righteousness and kindness, we can't help but think of the cross of Jesus.

There, hanging on the cross, sin was JUSTLY punished when Christ KINDLY took upon Himself your sin and mine!

Small wonder David wraps up this meditation on God the way he does.

*[21] My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord,
And all flesh will bless His holy name forever and ever!*

THAT is the end of Psalm 145 and that is the first installment in our series of studies in “Drawing Near.”

Conclusion:

So, again, why a series on prayer?

King David would tell us that God deserves it - and AMEN to that! I’ve already argued that given who God is and who we are and the condition of our world, prayer just makes sense. It’s logical.

I’ve got one more reason up my sleeve. When we pray, God changes us. Case in point. Me.

I was in my junior year of college (Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas) and had been a Christian for a few years. I was involved in a campus ministry based out of Grace Bible Church. I had a good friend named Greg, who served with me in that ministry.

Greg and I wanted to grow in Christ and were stymied about what a spiritual “next step” would look like. We decided we would pray.

So, we prayed.

We prayed together one hour a day for a semester. Six days a week we prayed. We adjusted the time when we prayed to fit our schedules. We prayed together from January through May - lots and lots of hours in prayer. I was never the same.

Oh, I still struggled. Thirty-eight years later, I still have my share of struggles. If I read my New Testament right, the Christian life is not struggle free.

But God used that prayer experiment to fundamentally change the trajectory of my life like He had used nothing before and like He’s used few things since.

I’m bringing this series on prayer because I want God to fundamentally change you and me into people who live for Jesus and who live like Jesus.

I’m preaching these messages because I want us to become a church that puts first things first. The first “first thing” is that God is God and deserves all of our worship and trust. Chief among the ways that we give Him our worship and trust is by prayer.

Everything flows out of a life of intimate relationship with God and that intimacy is nurtured by a life of prayer.

Would you join me in praying that God will use these weeks we have to spend together to help us all, as a church and as individuals, draw near?