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Message from Urbana 76

by Edmund Clowney

More from Urbana 76

Praise his name, we are called to doxological evangelism: Salvation is of the Lord! Let that song die and we have nothing to sing to the nations. They don't want to hear those old patronizing songs of missionary colonialism and they don't need our help in learning the chants of revolutionary violence. But when the people of God sing his praises, then the nations listen.

"Ladies and gentlemen, our national anthem!" Network television zooms in on the pop singer crooning about the dawn's early light under the artificial noon of the stadium arcs. The camera shifts to assorted embarrassed athletes standing more or less at attention. The baseball greats of the Red machine shift their wads of chewing tobacco - or is it bubble gum? There is Pete Rose, actually singing the national anthem. Then the whole stadium cheers. Patriotic fervor? No, the game is about to start.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, it is my privilege to announce our international anthem. No one has asked me to sing it - for some reason, no one has ever asked me to sing anything - but I have been asked to present it. It is not the "Internationale" of world communism; it is the doxology of the new mankind. One day the redeemed from every tribe, tongue, people and nation will sing the song of Moses and the Lamb on the other shore of the sea of fire (Rev. 15:2-3). But today God calls us to sing it here at Urbana: "Declare his glory among the nations, his wonders among all the peoples" (Ps: 96:3).

His glory, his wonders - the anthem of missions does better than make the all-time top ten. Here is heaven's Hallelujah Chorus, number one in eternity. Maybe you came to God singing, "Just As I Am," but you are sent to the nations singing, "How Great Thou Art!" What does it mean to declare the glory of God? From the two great themes of the Psalms we find the two stanzas of our international anthem: Praise God for what he has done; praise God for who he is. To declare God's glory among the nations we number his marvelous works (v. 3) and bless his name (v. 2).

Stanza One: Sing His Mighty Works!

The Lord is King! The cymbals clash, the people shout God's holy name. Psalm 96 is a psalm of acclamation. The ancient Babylonians enthroned their god Marduk in

a ritual New Year festival. But Israel shouts for him whose throne is established forever. One living God is the King of the nations because he is the God of creation. "All the gods of the peoples are idols; but the LORD made the heavens" (v 6). Israel calls the nations not to better worship of the gods, but to worship a better God - indeed the only God.

Ancient heathen hymns are full of descriptive praise telling the gods how great they are; a man with a large pantheon, like a man with a large harem, must be unusually convincing to the immediate object of his devotion. But the psalms of Israel ring with declarative praise, glorifying God for what he has done, beginning with his works of creation.

The Apostle Paul stands on the rocky; knoll of the Areopagus just beneath the Acropolis of Athens. In the shadow of the world's most beautiful temples he declares, "The God that made the world and all things therein, he, being Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands" (Acts 17:24). Not Zeus or Athena, but the God unknown to Greek wisdom is the Creator and the judge of the world.

"Praise him, ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters that are above the heavens. Let them praise the name of the Lord; for he commanded and they were created" (Ps. 148:4-5). "Fire and hail, snow and vapor; stormy wind, fulfilling his word; mountains and all hills, fruitful trees and all cedars" (Ps. 148:8-9): Descend with Jacques Cousteau to behold God's wonders in the deep; ascend with the astronauts and read the Genesis account in space. "O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth, who hast set thy glory above the heavens!" (Ps. 8:1).

Job's complaints were turned to adoration when God challenged him to consider the constellation of Orion, the thighbone of the hippopotamus and the scales of the crocodile (Job 40-41). But you do not need a telescope, a microscope, or even a trip to the zoo to find wonders from God's hand. Here you are, men and women, made in God's image. Before the vastness of the galaxies the psalmist may cry, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" (Ps. 8:4). But you are called to rule the earth, more than that; you are called to walk on earth with God your Maker. How beautifully the Bible describes man's creation God quickens the work of his fingers with the breath of his lips. The breath you draw to shout God's praise is his gift who made you for himself.

We need not hold our God-given breath while a landing craft on Mars turns over rocks looking for life. We know that we are not alone in the universe, and we have better companionship than anything that can crawl from under Martian rocks. "Know ye that the Lord, he is God: It is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves"; "Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker" (Ps 100:3; 95:6).

Praise is more than our duty; it is our humanity. Men have climbed Everest, they tell us, because the mountain is there. How much more must we climb God's holy

hill in worship because God is there, revealing his glory to man made in his image!

The God of the Psalms is Ruler as well as Creator. When the psalmist tells us that the world is established, that it cannot be moved (Ps. 96:10), he is celebrating God's works in controlling both nature and history. The nations rage, but God has only to speak and the earth melts (Ps, 46:6).

Every proud empire stands under God's judgment. Long after World War II there still stood in a West Berlin park a memorial from World War I. A bronze sculpture showed two German soldiers carrying a wounded comrade from the field of battle. The fury of the battle for Berlin in the second war had pocked the base of the statue with bullet marks. A more bizarre freak of battle made the sculpture a grotesque monument to the absurd. A shell had carried away the bronze head of the wounded soldier. The two heroes now labored to carry off a headless corpse. What a macabre monument to the ruin that Hitler's demonic genius brought upon Germany! As every earthly empire must, Hitler's thousand-year Reich came under the judgment of Almighty God.

God breaks the arrows of the bow (Ps. 76:3), burns the chariot in fire and is terrible to the kings of the earth (Ps. 76:12). God is terrible in justice. He hears the cry of the poor and oppressed from the barrios of earth; not one act of exploitation will go unavenged. "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Rom. 12:19, AV; Deut. 32:35). God's justice delayed is not justice denied. God is coming to judge the earth. The last judgment is not convened by a military tribunal protecting privilege or by a people's court seeking revolutionary vengeance; it is summoned by the righteous King of all the nations.

Declare the glory of the coming Judge. God's song for the nations thunders from the storm-cloud of God's wrath against wickedness. Paul preached the day of judgment to Athenian idolaters; missionary messengers must today be prophets of God's righteousness.

But is the anthem of missions accompanied only by the crescendo of God's trumpet, summoning the nations to God's work of judgment? No, the psalmist hails God not only as the King of the nations but as Savior: "Sing unto the Lord, bless his name; show forth his salvation from day to day" (Ps. 96:2). If God came only in wrath who could stand before his holiness? We may call down fire from heaven upon the sins of others, but how shall we escape when our own sins are judged?

Praise God, the cloud of glory is bright with mercy. Declare the glory of his saving acts - the glory of the fire that filled the bush in the desert but did not consume it, the glory of the "I-am" God who called to Moses from the fire to promise deliverance to his people groaning under the lash.

Declare his glory - the psalms sing of God's mighty acts in Egypt; they echo the song of Moses on the shore of Reed Sea: "I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath

triumphed gloriously: The horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation" (Ex. 15:1-2).

What glory Israel can sing! Pinned against the sea by the war chariots of Pharaoh's striking force, the people saw the cloud of God's glory become a wall of darkness and fire to restrain the enemy, and then a pillar of cloud to lead them through the parted sea (Pss. 77; 78;105;106). The psalms sing, too, of God's wonders in the desert when he led his flock like a Shepherd, fed them with bread from heaven and satisfied their thirst with water from the rock (Pss. 78; 105; 106; Neh. 9:17). The God of creation is the Lord of salvation.

But God's glory cloud did not just lead his people out of slavery. He brought them out that he might bring them in. At Sinai God said, "Ye have seen ... how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself" (Ex. 19:4).

"Unto myself!" On Sinai God came down in glory to establish his covenant with his redeemed people, to speak to them the words of his law. Through the mediation of Moses God gave Israel his law and his sanctuary. The glory that dazzled their eyes as it was reflected from the face of Moses filled the tabernacle, for God came down to dwell among his people.

God's exodus deliverance became a triumphal entry. The glory of God led his people into the promised land and up the height of his holy hill. There his glory filled his dwelling place in Zion. Indeed, this is the picture in Psalm 96. The Chronicler quotes the psalm in the context of King David's establishment of the service of praise after the ark of the Lord had been brought to Jerusalem (1 Chron. 16:23-33).

"God is gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet" (Ps. 47:5). "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; even lift them up, ye everlasting doors: and the King of glory will come in" (Ps. 24:9). The God of salvation is King in Zion. His trumpet sounds, summoning the nations to worship at his holy hill. Israel's shout of praise echoes to the islands of the sea.

For a moment God's glory did rest on Zion. Solomon's temple was filled with glory. The kings of the earth and the queen of the South came to Jerusalem to hear the wisdom of God's anointed, to see the blessing God had poured out on his chosen people (1 Kings 4:34; 10:6-9).

But Solomon turned from wisdom to folly, the kingdom was soon divided and God's blessing was turned to judgment. Where the cloud of glory had rested on God's house there arose the smoke of burning as invading Gentiles put the torch to the cedar of the temple.

Is Psalm 96, then, part of an ancient hymnbook to be found only under the charred remains of a gutted temple? No, Psalm 96 is the word of God, the saving God who remembers his promise to Abraham and the nations. Psalm 96 is anew song:

God's mighty deeds of the past will be fulfilled in his great deliverance in the future.

Isaiah takes up again the song of Moses to celebrate a second exodus: "The Lord, even the Lord, is my strength and song; and he is become my salvation" (Is. 12:2; Ex. 15:2). But what hope of glory can remain when Jerusalem is ruined and God's people are scattered among the nations? Ezekiel sees the glory of God departing from the temple; he sees the people of God--dead and decomposed, dry bones scattered in the valley. "Son of man, can these bones live?" (Ezek. 37:3).

Only One can bring life from death and glory from destruction. God himself must come in the power of his Spirit and the wonder of his presence. Man's plight is too hopeless for any other deliverer and God's own promises are too great for any lesser fulfillment.

The new song is an advent hymn: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.... The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together" (Is. 40:3, 5, AV).

Wonder of wonders, God will come not just to save his people from their captors but to save them from their sins. God will come not only as the King of glory but as the Lord our righteousness (Jer. 33:16). Not only will he tread the enemy underfoot; "he will tread our iniquities underfoot; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea" (Mic. 7:19).

The Lord will come and the Servant will come. He is the Branch of Righteousness (Jer. 33:15), the Son of David, called to sit at God's right hand (Ps. 110:1). He is the root of Jesse, "To him shall the nations seek" (Is. 11:10). When God's judgement hews down the cedar of Israel's pride he does not utterly destroy his people. No, there is a remnant; a tiny shoot springs up from the stump of the fallen tree. Here is the Christmas tree of the prophet. God's shoot, God's branch, grows to become a great mast on the mountain, a standard to which the nations are drawn.

That shoot from the root of David is the Lord's Messiah. By him and to him the nations are gathered. But the mystery of God's salvation lies in the Messiah's work. To redeem his people God must blot out as a thick cloud their transgressions and sins (Is 44:22). The kings of the earth are astonished when they see the face of God's Servant: Torn and scarred, he is inhuman in the anguish of his suffering (Is. 52:14). He is despised as a shoot out of dry ground. Yet "surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; ... he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities." His soul was made an offering for sin. "He poured out his soul unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors: yet he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" as. 53:4-5, 10, 12).

Now we see him who is raised as an ensign above the nations - he is lifted on a cross. "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth," said Jesus, "will draw all men

unto myself" (Jn.12:32). John explains, "But this he said, signifying by what manner of death he should die" (v. 33).

"Declare his glory among the nations." What wonders are the nations to hear? That the God of glory, the King of the nations has come to save. The Lord has come as the Servant. Heaven's glory drives darkness from the fields of Bethlehem. An angel announces, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ, the Lord!" But shepherds, not the nations, see the glory, and the sign they receive is a child lying in the feed bin of a stable.

What wonder silences us before the mystery of God's coming in Jesus Christ! Yes, the glory has come, for he has come. "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee ... Nations shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising" (Is. 60:1-3). The magi follow his star from the east and worship him; old Simeon holds the infant Jesus and blesses God for the salvation "prepared before ... all peoples; a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel" (Lk. 2:31-32).

Indeed both John the Baptist and Jesus come preaching the Kingdom of God: the message of the coming of God the King taken from these royal psalms and the good news proclaimed by Isaiah. The mighty works of God the King celebrated in the Psalms are wrought by the Lord of Glory in the midst of his people: He feeds the hungry, makes the lame to walk, the blind to see, the deaf to hear. He stills the roaring of the seas (Ps. 65:7), he speaks life to the dead and gathers his remnant flock as the true Shepherd (Ezek. 34:11).

But he does not bring the judgment of God's justice, and John the Baptist sends from prison an anguished question: "Art thou he that cometh?" (Lk. 7:19). Can this be the Lord whose reward is with him and his recompense before him (Is. 40:10)?

John is blessed if he is not offended with Jesus. Christ did not come to bring the judgment but to bear it. The song of praise in the Psalms is found most often in the vow of the sufferer to render thanks to God for delivering him from the depths. Jesus Christ is the royal sufferer who cries in abandonment as he drinks the cup of wrath, but who sings in resurrection triumph as he goes up with a shout to the Father's right hand. The agonizing Savior could count all his bones as he hung on the cross, but in his triumph he will count his Father's blessings. In Psalm 22, the psalm of his agony, he utters his vow of thanksgiving: "In the midst of the congregation will I sing thy praise" (Ps. 22:22; Heb. 2:12b).

The angels sang at Christ's birth, "Glory to God in the highest," but it was the shepherds who returned from the stable, "glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen" (Lk. 2:20).

Brothers and sisters, the new song, God's missionary anthem, is our song. Not the holy angels but redeemed sinners sing it on planet earth, and we sing it with Jesus. Yes, Christ now sings his missionary triumph among the Gentiles.

"For I say that Christ hath been made a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, that he might confirm the promises given unto the fathers, and that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, Therefore will I give praise unto thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name" (Rom. 15:8-9).

When we sing God's glory among the nations, we sing with Jesus. How Paul the apostle thrilled to hear the Gentiles with one mouth glorifying the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 15:6).

The wall of partition that shut out the Gentiles from God's altar has been broken down. The Gentiles who were afar off are now brought near, and the spiritual sacrifice of their bodies is acceptable to God (Rom.12:1-2): The song of Moses has become the song of the Lamb, the international anthem of the redeemed who are no more strangers or aliens, but fellow-citizens with the saints, joined to the commonwealth of Israel, of the household of God (Eph. 2:11-22). Only now the mountain for our festival of praise is not Sinai with its fire and smoke or even Zion where Solomon's temple stood. Rather, it is the heavenly Zion where the saints and angels are gathered, and where, Jesus is, who has sprinkled the mercy-seat of heaven with his blood.

Our generation has a new perspective on this planet. We have seen its beauty, marbled with clouds, photographed from the moon. Christ's church needs anew perspective on the nations, gained not from the moon but from heaven—from that assembly where Jesus leads the song of redemption.

Stanza Two: Sing His Glorious Name!

Praising God's works of salvation always means praising his name as Redeemer. The very name "Jesus" blesses God the Savior. He is the "Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" (Is. 9:16). Jesus taught us to pray, "Hallowed be thy name!" He poured out his life's blood to make that prayer our song. We declare the glory of that holy name that is made our name in Jesus Christ. Remember, you are baptized not into your own name but into God's name: the name of the Father; the Son, the Holy Ghost.

Does the very name of God bring joy to your heart and praise to your lips? Do you remember the ten lepers sent by Jesus to show themselves to the priests at Jerusalem to be pronounced clean? Obedient, but lepers still, they set off on the long journey. What risk if they were to near the temple as lepers! But as they walked they were healed. One of them, a Samaritan, spun about. Shouting "Glory to God!" he rushed back down the rocky path to Jesus, fell headlong at his feet and gave thanks to the Savior. Jesus said, "Were not the ten cleansed? But where are the nine?" (Lk. 17:17).

"Where are the nine? Why, Jesus, they are on the road to Jerusalem. They are going where you sent them—to the priest who can pronounce them clean. Jesus, you said nothing about coming back. They are doing their duty!"

Duty? Yes, but what obedience is this that knows nothing of the joy of salvation, the praise of God's name! A sinful woman bursts unbidden into the Pharisee's dinner to wet the feet of Jesus with her tears; Mary of Bethany lavishes upon Jesus the extravagant spikenard of her devotion.

Glory to God! Paul the apostle, once Saul the inquisitor, was stopped short in his persecuting rage by the glory of the Lord. He heard from his Savior's lips the name of Jesus. Ever after he rejoiced in God's amazing grace. Reflecting on the profound depths of God's sovereign will in salvation, he cried, "For of him, and through him, and unto him, are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36).

Praise his name, we are called to doxological evangelism: Salvation is of the Lord! Let that song die and we have nothing to sing to the nations. They don't want to hear those old patronizing songs of missionary colonialism and they don't need our help in learning the chants of revolutionary violence. But when the people of God sing his praises, then the nations listen.

Praise his name, our God is glorious in wisdom. Kings came to learn of the wisdom of Solomon, but a greater than Solomon is here: Jesus Christ! From the cloud of glory on the mount the disciples heard the Father's command: "This is my Son, my chosen: hear ye him" (Lk. 9:35). Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me" (Matt. 11:29). "If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments" (Jn. 14:15). The words spoken by Jesus have been confirmed by those that heard (Heb. 2:3); we are to remember "the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles" (2 Pet. 3:2).

To declare his name we must be taught by his Word. The nations must hear of the real Jesus, the biblical Jesus. God speaks to us in his Son and commands us to listen. We cannot stand under the name of God and over the Word of God. Indeed, God's name is in his Word, for God speaks to us to reveal himself. The mystery of God's name is reflected in his Word. How soon we are beyond our depth! Yet only then can we know with Paul what it means to be lifted up with praise on the towering wave of divine wisdom.

My friends, we do not declare among the nations an empty mantra, a name that means everything and nothing. We declare the riches of God's truth, the whole counsel of God, the glory of Jesus Christ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3).

Praise his name! We sing the glory of his power, too. God's name is hallowed in majesty in Jesus Christ our King.

Who is the King of glory? Once he rode through the hosannas and the palm branches to Jerusalem so that he might climb the hill of Calvary to die. But now he has ascended another hill. "Lift up your heads, O ye gates, even lift them up

ye everlasting doors and the king, of glory shall come in." The Lord mighty in battle has triumphed over the powers of darkness, and he ascends to his Father's throne. The Son, the brightness of the Father's glory says, "All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:18-19).

Christ's heavenly glory is not just a reservoir of power, an energy source to be used in disciplining the nations; no, Christ's glory is the Lordship to which they are disciplined. If we do not praise his name, we do not preach the gospel. We baptize into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost those who confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Christ now rules over history and walks among the heavenly lampstands as the judge of his church. Our gospel is "the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4).

Strange as it may seem to us, we proclaim his glorious name not in the posture of conquering heroes but as ministering slaves. Sometimes, like James and John, we begin to fantasize about becoming princes at Christ's right hand, or at least riding, as a Rose Bowl marshal in the parade of Christ's kingdom. If that's what you have in mind, you have the right parade but the wrong place.

Paul, the bond slave of Jesus Christ pictures his ministry not as though he were riding in Christ's triumphal chariot, but as though he were a chief captive, chained to the chariot of the victorious king (2 Cor. 2:14). We carry the treasure of Christ's glorious name in earthen vessels. Pressed, perplexed, pursued, knocked down, the apostle bears in his body the dying of Jesus, knowing that he will also be raised with Jesus (2 Cor. 4:8-14). He was made a spectacle, widely regarded as trash by the world. But what about your position? "I beseech you," writes Paul, "be imitators of me!" (1 Cor. 4:16).

Yes, the name of Jesus, the King of glory, was nailed above the cross. His name is glorious in wisdom and power and it is glorified in love. The wisdom of God is foolishness to men; the power of God is weakness to men; the love of God is an offense to men. Yet we bear before the nations God's name of love.

In the shadow of the cross, Christ's soul was troubled. He cried, "What shall I say? Father, save me from this hour?" (Jn. 12:27a). That was the prayer of the afflicted psalmist, the cry of the Lord's anointed for deliverance. "But for this cause came I unto this hour" (Jn.12:27b). Jesus came as priest and sacrifice, to give his life a ransom for many. What shall he say? What prayer but this: "Father, glorify thy name!" (v. 28). Jesus, who taught his disciples to pray, "Hallowed be thy name," now prays that the Father will hallow his name at the cross. The Father in heaven replies, "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again" (v. 28). How will the Father now glorify his name?

Will he glorify it with the glory of legions of angels? With the glory of the cloud on the mount? No, the Father will glorify his name by lifting up his Son on Golgotha.

What glory is this? The shame of nakedness, the agony of torture, the bitter wine of mockery, the doom of abandonment. Does the elect Son glorify the Father's name when he cries, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Yes, never was God's name so glorified. The eternal song of the seraphim cannot so lift it up. The devotion of the Son is fulfilled. In love to the Father he drinks the cup; in love to his own he offers his soul for sin. And the infinite love of the heart of the Father burns in the darkness. "God commendeth his own dove toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son," (Jn. 3:16). The price that Abraham did not have to pay when Isaac was spared at the altar on Mount Moriah, that price God the Father paid when he spared not his only-begotten Son, but delivered him up for us all.

Declare among the nations the name of the God of Calvary, the glory of the love of God that sealed salvation at the cross. You may be called to sing the psalms of glory in a prison cell of affliction. Paul did that at Philippi. His bleeding back was too raw, his feet too numb in the stocks to find rest in sleep, so he found refreshment in praise: "The Lord reigns; ... the Lord is great; ... holy is he!" Is it surprising that those who glory in the cross are called to take the cross and follow Christ?

What do you seek here at Urbana? Is it the glory of your Lord? Lift up the Lord's great name in the praise-offering of your lips and with the thank-offering of your life. Present your bodies a living sacrifice of praise, holy, acceptable to God (Rom. 12:1).

The first question for you is not where among the nations the Lord may call you nor even how among the nations your lips and life may declare his glory. The first question is: have you seen the glory of the Lord? Have you heard the voice of the Son of God calling from Calvary?

Yes, here at Urbana you may learn of Christ the King of glory whose power will judge the warring nations, of Christ the prophet of glory whose Word is truth for the erring nations, of Christ the priest of glory whose sacrifice is the only salvation for the rebellious nations. But to proclaim his name among the nations you must first bless his name in your heart.

Cry to him in repentance, call upon his name in faith and sing with these thousands the glory of Jesus Christ your Savior. Like Jehoshaphat's army of old, the church goes out to the spiritual battle singing the praises of the Lord. Jesus sang in the upper room with his disciples. Now he leads the praises of his people. Sing with Jesus his international anthem, the song of the Lamb!
Hallelujah!

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