

THE GOD WHO GIVES BEFORE WE ASK

Psalm 65

“When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions. Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts. We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple.” (Ps. 65:3-4)

What beautiful verses for the beginning of a new year! God chooses us, He forgives our sins, He draws close to us and fills us with good things. He does all these things for us because He loves us. And He loves us because He is a God of love.

You may or may not know this, but other religions don't worship a God of love: they worship a god of business, a trading partner who gives as he gets. If you meditate enough on him, he'll give you wisdom. If you do enough good deeds, you'll be reincarnated higher on the chain of being in the next life. If you do a rain dance he will send rain. If you do enough penance, he will forgive your sins. If you offer him sacrifices he'll give you victory in battle. This is a god who returns favor for favor, a *quid pro quo* god who requires things from us before he gives us the things we want.

But the God of the Bible doesn't do things this way. He does things without our asking, He doesn't reward us for good deeds: He changes our hearts so that we want to do good deeds for the sheer joy of doing them. He makes His sun to shine on the righteous and the wicked. He forgives our sins first and that makes us want to repent of them. He doesn't require us to offer sacrifices to Him; He offered the greatest possible sacrifice for us.

Of course all those other gods don't really exist: they are false gods, idols that people create out of their own imaginations. The God of the Bible—the Lord of heaven and earth doesn't wait for us to ask for things: He gives us things before we ask for them--sometimes before we even know that we need them.

This God didn't create the heavens and the earth because someone asked him to. He created them because beauty and majesty are simply the result of His presence. When God created all things great and small, He was just being God!

And when Jesus Christ—Immanuel, God-with-us—took on human flesh and mounted a cross to suffer and die for our sins, he didn't do it because we asked him to. We didn't even know we had a problem! If Jesus had waited for us to ask, he would still be waiting because those who are dead in their sins has neither the inclination nor the ability to ask for anything. As Paul writes in His *Letter to the Romans*: *“But God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)* Or in the words of the Psalmist: *“When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our*

transgressions.” (Psalm 65:4) God did it because He is God and God gives before we ask.

And when the Holy Spirit, the very breath of God that infuses life into the world, swept into an upper room in Jerusalem where the Apostles were cowering in fear and carried them out into the streets of Jerusalem and from there into Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth—it wasn’t in response to a distress signal from mankind. The Holy Spirit came because God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but would have all men turn from their sinful ways and live. It was just God being God—giving before he had been asked.

And what happened in history happens in the life of every single believer. God called each one of us by name before we were even conceived; he knit us together in our mother’s womb and he delivered us into the arms of parents He had created to take care of us. We didn’t ask: He just did it. And Jesus died on the cross almost two thousand years before you and I were born so that the penalty for all our sins would be paid in full. We didn’t ask: He just did it. And then God applied the benefits of that Holy Sacrifice to us through our second birth of water and the Spirit so that we might have eternal life. We didn’t ask to be born again any more than we asked to be born the first time: He just did it when the time was right. And finally, He sent His Holy Spirit into each of our hearts to show us our sins, create faith in Jesus Christ, and give us new life. He didn’t do this in response to our invitation any more than the wind blows east or west because we invited it to: He did it because he wanted to and He wanted to because He loves us.

We didn’t choose Him, He chose us, as the Psalmist says, and he brought us into His courts so that we might be close to Him and so that He might fill us with good things.

We human beings in our fallen condition have a tendency to recreate God in our own image. We try to make Him into a god we can do business with. *“I’ll scratch Your back, God, if you’ll scratch mine.”* “Give me that promotion and I’ll go to church every Sunday for three months! Or, if you prefer, I’ll go to church every Sunday for three months and THEN you give me the promotion—OK?” Can you believe it—at one point in my business career I prayed every morning on the way to work that I would be given a particular office that I knew was coming open! The fact is, we’re more comfortable with a god we can deal with because down deep we are wheeler-dealers who fancy that we know a good bargain when we see it, that we can get a little more out of God than we’re currently getting.

But God doesn’t make deals! He doesn’t need to ask anything from us because there is absolutely nothing you and I can give Him that he doesn’t already have! We don’t add anything to God with our worship or our prayers or our good intentions or even with our money: it already belongs to Him. All we can do is receive whatever He chooses to give us, and be grateful.

And that bothers us, doesn't it? We like to think that we can earn our own keep and pay our own way. God's unconditional love makes us uncomfortable because it's an insult to our pride. Our pride lies in our conviction that we can make it on our own without God—that we can pull our own weight with no help from Him. Deep down we believe that if we would just put our mind to it we could build a tower of knowledge all the way to heaven and know all that can be known—without any help from God.

But that's all *σκυβαλον!* There were a bunch of men who tried to do that once; it was called the tower of Babel and it didn't turn out all that well. We should know better than that by now, shouldn't we? Seventeen years ago we turned the page on a century of bloodshed and carnage that put to shame all previous history, a century that included two world wars, and over one hundred million deaths directly attributable to the rise of secularist governments in Germany, Russia, China and Southeast Asia. Now we are facing a tsunami of terrorism around the globe and an age of nuclear drones, biological and chemical warfare which may put the last century to shame. A little over one hundred years ago, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats looked into the future with dread and wrote the following:

“Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world; the blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned. The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity....And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?” (The Second Coming)

If history has taught us anything it is that mankind has an almost limitless capacity to visit horrors upon itself and creation. We can go merrily along trying to make silk purses out of sows' ears and dreaming of castles in the sky, but if history is any measure of the future, the future is far from bright. When Father Adam made the fatal decision to abandon God and try to make it on his own, he plunged us all into a mess which only God can pull us out of.

It's simple: God wants to give—and so He gives—freely and with no expectation of repayment. He gives gifts—and gifts are not gifts if we pay for them. God isn't selling his favor, he's only giving it away. We'd prefer to earn it, but we can't—first of all because it's not for sale, and second, because we couldn't pay for it if it were. We just don't have the resources.

The last words Martin Luther uttered before he died were: “We are all beggars, that's for sure.”

And beggars can't pay for anything they receive.

They can only say thanks. Amen.

Psalm 65 For the director of music. A psalm of David. A song.

- ¹ Praise awaits you, our God, in Zion;
to you our vows will be fulfilled.
- ² You who answer prayer,
to you all people will come.
- ³ When we were overwhelmed by sins,
you forgave our transgressions.
- ⁴ Blessed are those you choose
and bring near to live in your courts!
We are filled with the good things of your house,
of your holy temple.
- ⁵ You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds,
God our Savior,
the hope of all the ends of the earth
and of the farthest seas,
- ⁶ who formed the mountains by your power,
having armed yourself with strength,
- ⁷ who stilled the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves,
and the turmoil of the nations.
- ⁸ The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders;
where morning dawns, where evening fades,
you call forth songs of joy.
- ⁹ You care for the land and water it;
you enrich it abundantly.
The streams of God are filled with water
to provide the people with grain,
for so you have ordained it.
- ¹⁰ You drench its furrows and level its ridges;
you soften it with showers and bless its crops.
- ¹¹ You crown the year with your bounty,
and your carts overflow with abundance.
- ¹² The grasslands of the wilderness overflow;
the hills are clothed with gladness.
- ¹³ The meadows are covered with flocks
and the valleys are mantled with grain;
they shout for joy and sing.