

Why Does God always demand Praise?

C.S. Lewis (edited)

When I first began to draw near to belief in God...I found a stumbling block in the demand so clamorously made by all religious people that we should "praise" God; still more in the suggestion that God Himself demanded it. We all despise the man who demands continued assurance of his own virtue, intelligence or delightfulness; we despise still more the crowd of people round every dictator, every millionaire, every celebrity, who gratify that demand. Thus a picture, at once ludicrous and horrible, both of God and of His worshippers, threatened to appear in my mind. The Psalms were especially troublesome in this way... More than once the Psalmists seemed to be saying, "God, you like praise. Do this for me, and you shall have some." ... Again and again the speaker asks to be saved from death on the ground that if God lets him die God will get no more praise from them, for the ghosts in Sheol cannot praise. And mere quantity of praise seemed to count; "seven times a day do I praise thee." It was extremely distressing. It made one think what one least wanted to think. Gratitude to God, reverence to Him, obedience to Him, I thought I could understand; not this perpetual talk of God's "right" to be praised.

I still think "right" is a bad way of expressing it, but I believe I now see what that author meant. It is perhaps easiest to begin with inanimate objects, which can have no rights. What do we mean when we say that a picture is "admirable"? We certainly don't mean it "deserves" admiration in the sense in which a student "deserves" a high mark from a teacher- i.e. that a human being will have suffered injustice if it is not awarded. The sense in which the picture "deserves" or "demands" admiration is rather this; admiration is the correct, adequate or appropriate, response to it, that, if paid, admiration will not be "thrown away", and that if we do not admire we shall be stupid, insensible, and great losers, we shall have missed something. In that way many objects both in Nature and in Art may be said to deserve, or merit, or demand, admiration. It was from this end that I found it best to approach the idea that God "demands" praise. **To worship God is simply to be awake, to have entered the real world; not to appreciate Him is to have lost the greatest experience, and in the end to have lost all.** The incomplete and crippled lives of those who are tone deaf, have never been in love, never known true friendship, never cared for a good book, never enjoyed the feel of the morning air on their cheeks, never enjoyed football, are faint images of it. But of course this is not all. God does not only "demand" praise as the supremely beautiful and all-satisfying Object. He does apparently command it as lawgiver. The Jews were told to sacrifice. We are under an obligation to go to church. But this was a difficulty only because I did not understand that **it is in the process of being worshipped that God communicates His presence to men.** It is not of course the only way. But for many people at many times the "fair beauty of the Lord" is revealed chiefly or only while they worship Him together. Even in Judaism the essence of the sacrifice was not really that men gave bulls and goats to God, but that by their so doing God gave Himself to men; in the central act of our own worship of course this is far clearer- there it is who receive. The miserable idea that God should in any sense need, or crave for, our worship like a vain woman wanting compliments, or a vain author presenting his new books to people who never met or heard of him, is implicitly answered by the words "If I hungry I would not tell you". Even if such an

absurd Deity could be conceived, He would hardly come to us, the lowest of rational creatures, to gratify His appetite. I don't want my dog to bark approval of my books.

**But the most obvious fact about praise-whether of God or anything-
strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving
of honour. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into
praise...**

The world rings with praise - lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite game - praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. I had not noticed how the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious, minds, praised most, while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least. The good critics found something to praise in many imperfect works; the bad ones continually narrowed the list of books we might be allowed to read. The healthy and unaffected man, even if luxuriously brought up and widely experienced in good cookery, could praise a very modest meal: the dyspeptic and the snob found fault with all. Except where intolerably adverse circumstances interfere, praise almost seems to be inner health made audible. Not does it cease to be so when, through lack of skill, the forms of its expression are very uncouth or even ridiculous. Heaven knows, many poems of praise addressed to an earthy beloved are as bad as our bad hymns, and an anthology of love poems for public and perpetual use would probably be as sore a trial to literary taste as *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. **I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously
praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising
it:**

“Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?” The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can't help doing, about everything else we value.

**I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely
expresses but completes the enjoyment;** it is its appointed consummation. 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. This is so even when our expressions are inadequate, as of course they usually are... The worthier the object, the more intense this delight would be. If it were possible for a created soul fully (I mean, up to the full measure conceivable in a finite being) to “appreciate”, that is to love and delight in, the worthiest object of all, and simultaneously at every moment to give this delight perfect expression, then that soul would be in supreme bliss. It is along these lines that I find it easiest to understand the Christian doctrine that “Heaven” is a state in which angels now, and men hereafter, are perpetually employed in praising God. This does not mean, as it can so dismally suggest, that it is like “being in Church”. For our “services” both in their conduct and in our power to participate, are merely attempts at worship. Never fully successful... We are not riders but pupils in the riding school; for most of us the falls and bruises, the aching muscles and the severity of the exercise, far outweigh those few

moments in which we were, to our own astonishment, actually galloping without terror and without disaster. To see what the doctrine really means, we must suppose ourselves to be in perfect love with God- drunk with, drowned in, dissolved by, that delight which, far from remaining pent up within ourselves as incommunicable, hence hardly tolerable, bliss, flows out from us incessantly again in effortless and perfect expression, our joy no more separable from the praise in which it liberates and utters itself that the brightness a mirror receives is separable from the brightness it sheds. The Scotch catechism says that man's chief end is "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever". But we shall then know that these are the same thing. Fully to enjoy is to glorify. **In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him.**

Meanwhile of course we are merely, as Donne says, tuning our instruments. The tuning up of the orchestra can be itself delightful, but only to those who can in some measure, however little, anticipate the symphony. The Jewish sacrifices, and even our own most sacred rites, as they actually occur in human experience, are, like the tuning - promise, not performance. Hence, like the tuning, they may have in them much duty and little delight; or none. But the duty exists for the delight. When we carry out our "religious duties" we are like people digging channels in a waterless land, in order that when at last the water comes, it may find them ready.

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