

How Shall I Praise th' Eternal God

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

How shall I praise th' eternal God,
That Infinite Unknown?
Who can ascend his high Abode,
Or venture near his Throne?

The great Invisible! He dwells
Conceal'd in dazzling Light;
But his All-searching Eye reveals
The Secrets of the Night.

Those watchful Eyes, that never sleep,
Survey the World around;
His Wisdom is a boundless Deep
Where all our Thoughts are drown'd.]

He knows no Shadow of a Change
Nor alters his Decrees;
Firm as a Rock his Truth remains
To guard his Promises.]

Justice, upon a dreadful Throne
Maintains the Rights of God,
While Mercy sends her Pardons down,
Bought with a Saviour's Blood.

Now to my Soul, Immortal King,
Speak some forgiving Word;
Then 'twill be double Joy to sing
The Glories of my Lord.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

God's Self-Existence: Part One

Kevin T. Bauder

One day a deacon from a church in my area phoned me to share his philosophy of creation-and-salvation history. He began his story by claiming that God, having lived forever without companionship, became lonely and needed someone to fellowship with. Thus compelled, God created the world and the first humans. When they sinned, God *had* to invent a plan of redemption, because if He did not, He would be lonely forever.

It occurred to me that this man had not really thought much about who the Bible reveals God to be. The notion of a needy God, compelled to create and to redeem by some necessity beyond Himself, is completely at odds with the biblical picture. I would like to look at one part of that picture. My method will be to trace a theme in the conversation that occurs in the book of Job, and then to follow that theme to its termination in the New Testament. This conversation emphasizes God's self-existence, which is fundamental for understanding God's person. The conversation begins in Job 19:7, where Job is speaking (quotations are from the New American Standard Bible).

¹"Behold, I cry, 'Violence!' but I get no answer; I shout for help, but there is no justice.

Here is the nub of Job's argument: Job insists that he is being treated unjustly. He is not getting what he deserves. Who is responsible for the injustice? Implicitly, Job's statement accuses God, because God is the one who permits suffering when Job deserves vindication.

We who are outside the story know that Job's perspective is mistaken. Within the story it receives a direct response from Eliphaz in Job 22:2–3.

²"Can a vigorous man be of use to God, Or a wise man be useful to himself?

³"Is there any pleasure to the Almighty if you are righteous, Or profit if you make your ways perfect?

Eliphaz responds to Job's claim with a series of rhetorical questions that expect negative answers. We could translate these questions into denials:



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A mighty man is of no use to God.

A wise man is of no use to himself. [This half of the verse is difficult to translate].

A righteous person adds no pleasure to the Almighty.

There is no profit [to God] in perfect ways.

Some of this seems counter-intuitive, especially when we remember that Job's friends tilted strongly toward a theory that God rewards good and evil directly in the here-and-now. So we must ask, what is Eliphaz's point?

Eliphaz is saying that God never owes us anything. If we are great or if we are righteous, we add nothing to God. Even if we make our ways perfect we cannot place God in our debt. God does not need us, so even our best efforts entitle us to no claim upon the Almighty.

When we read this response, we face a problem: we have learned to distrust Eliphaz because he gets so much wrong. Yet he does not get everything wrong, so we must ask whether he is correct here or whether this is simply another of his mistakes. We must wait to find out, because Job is going to return to his complaint in Job 31:33–37.

³³“Have I covered my transgressions like Adam, By hiding my iniquity in my bosom,

³⁴Because I feared the great multitude, And the contempt of families terrified me, And kept silent and did not go out of doors?

³⁵“Oh that I had one to hear me! Behold, here is my signature; Let the Almighty answer me! And the indictment which my adversary has written,

³⁶Surely I would carry it on my shoulder, I would bind it to myself like a crown.

³⁷“I would declare to Him the number of my steps; Like a prince I would approach Him.

Job denies that he is guilty of any hidden sin. Because he sees himself as innocent, he yearns for a courtroom confrontation with the Almighty. Job is convinced that he can prove that he is being treated unfairly. His complaint amounts to an accusation that God is unjust, and this time Elihu replies in Job 35:5–7.

⁵“Look at the heavens and see; And behold the clouds—they are higher than you.

⁶“If you have sinned, what do you accomplish against Him? And if your transgressions are many, what do you do to Him?

⁷“If you are righteous, what do you give to Him, Or what does He receive from your hand?

Usually Elihu contradicts and rebukes Job's three friends. Here, however, he makes the same point as Eliphaz, only he makes it more emphatically. Our

sins leave God unscathed. Our transgressions cannot harm Him. Our righteousness contributes nothing to Him. In other words, we can neither help nor hurt God. We never add anything to Him. Therefore, we have no claim on God; He owes us nothing.

Elihu is usually closer to the truth than Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar, and he is probably right here, too. If so, then God does not need us. He is not hurt by our evildoing and He is not helped by our righteousness. He remains all that He is regardless of who we are or what we do.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
