

Studying God's works

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When I was in junior high, I checked out the Great Books edition of Thomas Aquinas's writings at our local library. I don't remember how I knew about Thomas, since my family and I weren't Roman Catholic. We were churchgoers, though, and I loved science, plus I had a nascent interest in philosophy, so I suppose I made some connection. Looking through Thomas's *Summa*, I was fascinated by the scholastic method of theological inquiry. I'd never seen such a diligent inquiry into religious assertions.

Four years later, the complete English translation of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* appeared on the "new acquisitions" shelf of my college library. Again, I was fascinated. Those famous small-print sections of Barth's hefty volumes looked so fascinating! His method was different from Thomas's *Summa*, but I loved Barth's own style of diligent inquiry into God's truth.

I thought about all this as I read Psalm 111. The psalm refers to *studying* God's works. How do you know that God is great? You study the things God has done! You might even call it data-collecting concerning God's salvation.

The psalm alludes to a few particulars. Verse 4 may refer to the Egyptian plagues and the Exodus, verse 5 to the manna of the wilderness. Then there is the covenant of God (vs. 5), including not only God's precepts (vs. 7-8) but also God's constant providence and grace for Israel. Those who practice the fear of the Lord are on their way to wisdom and understanding.

The text also sets the proper condition under which people can study God's works: praise for God. The whole psalm is framed by the word "praise," and of course the psalm's tone is one of effusive amazement at God's awesome care and work. Do we really know God if we don't have a praising attitude? We could, but it would be a fairly shallow knowledge. Praise is an epistemological principle.

We speak of people having a "seeking" faith. Often that means that people aren't quite satisfied with usual beliefs. We also say that church folks *don't* have a seeking attitude when they're unaware of things happening at their church, in spite of pulpit and bulletin announcements. These attitudes are in contrast with the psalmist's sense of wonder and expectation.

Praise is a condition for and a result of an eager, expectant faith. We become aware of God's great works in the Bible as well as in our own lives. Praise is a consequence of that deepened awareness. But praise also leads us to want to learn more about God and to experience God's righteousness, blessings, guidance and love. Likewise, praise necessitates a humble attitude. Both Thomas and Barth, two of history's great theologians, believed their life's work paled in comparison to God's riches.