



Don't Toot your own Horn – God doesn't!

God seldom praises himself in Scripture

Proverbs 27 opens with a pair of proverbs about boasting. Verse 1 concerns boasting about the future: *"Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth."* Since we do not know what the future holds and we do not control what will happen, it would be foolish for us to brag about what we will do, because things could turn out otherwise. We make our plans, yes, but we say *Deo volente*, *"If God wills"* (James 4:15). This proverb applies to all of us. It does not, however, apply to God. He does know what a day may bring forth; he can speak about what he will do in the future, and he often does. Scripture is filled with passages in which God foretells what he is about to do, and time and again his words prove true. For God to speak about the future is not empty boasting but a trustworthy word.

Verse 2 concerns boasting about yourself: *"Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; someone else, and not your own lips."* A bit more literally, one could translate: "Let a stranger praise you, and not your own mouth, a foreigner, and not your own lips." The point seems to be that praise should come from someone who is not personally connected to you in any way, someone who does not know you or stand to gain from praising you, so that his praise cannot be construed as flattery but as sincere and selfless.

Self-praise

Entirely the opposite is self-praise, "tooting your own horn," which is self-serving and arrogant. There are a number of examples in Scripture of people who praised themselves. Think of the boast of Lamech in Genesis 4: *"I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times."* Or the boast of Samson in Judges 15: *"With a donkey's jawbone I have made donkeys of them. With a donkey's jawbone I have killed a thousand men."* Or think of Haman the Agagite in Esther 5, how he called together his friends and his wife and boasted to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways that the king had honoured him. Other examples of boasting are not hard to find: that of Sennacherib in 2 Kings 19, of Assyria in Isaiah 10, and of the king of Babylon in Isaiah 14.

Solomon's counsel is to *"let another praise you, and not your own mouth; someone else, and not your own lips."*

It's a proverb that applies to everyone, but again the exception is God. If anyone could legitimately praise himself, it is the unique, incomparable God, who does all things for his own glory. For God to speak highly of himself is not vanity or arrogance, but simple truth. He cannot overstate how great he is because his greatness is infinite. It would be arrogance on our part to take it ill of God that he praises himself. After all, only he knows how great he is, and only he can say it as it should be said. Even if the Bible were filled with divine boasting, it would be nothing less than the truth.

Interestingly, however, God seldom praises himself in Scripture. He is not constantly speaking about himself in glowing terms. Most of the praise for God is not found in first person speech – God speaking about himself – but in second and third person speech: others speaking about God. To be sure, even second and third person speech is divine revelation, and yet it is striking that such revelation is usually framed in the second and third persons: not *"How great I am,"* but *"How great you are,"* *"How great he is."* The Lord does not behave at all like Lamech or Haman, singing his own praises to all who will listen. Rather, he listens, while others sing his praise.

When God speaks about himself

God does, of course, speak about himself quite often in Scripture. When one considers all the instances of first person divine speech, they fall broadly into three categories.

In the first category are instances in which God *identifies* himself:

"Abram, I am your shield" (Genesis 15:1);

"I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land" (Genesis 15:7);

"Jacob, I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac" (Genesis 28:13);

"Israel, I am the LORD who heals you" (Exodus 15:26);

"I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2);

"Aaron, I am your share and your inheritance" (Numbers 18:20).

Notice that when God identifies himself, it's not just *who I am*, but *who I am to you*.

In the second category, God *characterizes* himself.

"I am grieved that I have made mankind" (Genesis 6:7);

"If you take your neighbour's cloak as a pledge and don't return it at sunset and he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate" (Exodus 22:27);

"I am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5);

"I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44);

"I make you holy" (Leviticus 20:8);

"Your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates; ... I am weary of bearing them" (Isaiah 1:14).

Notice again that these self-descriptions are not of God in isolation but in relation to his people.

The third category is the biggest. Most of God's first person speech concerns his *actions*, what he has done, is doing, will do. Often his actions are proof of his identity and character.

"By this you will know that I am the LORD: With the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water of the Nile, and it will be changed into blood" (Exodus 7:17);

"I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD" (Exodus 12:12);

or think of the refrain of the book of Ezekiel:

"Then they will know that I am the LORD."

Not self-praise

Yet none of these three categories of divine first person speech can be called self-praise. Such passages are few and far-between, and even where they do occur, there are often other reasons for them, reasons that relate to God's concern for his people. Let's consider a few examples. In Deuteronomy 32:39 God says,

"See now that I myself am he! There is no God besides me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand."

Self-praise? Perhaps, but in context it's God's response to a people who have abandoned him for idols. It's part of a song for God's people to sing, a song meant to function as a witness and a warning to them. In Psalm 46:10 the LORD says, *"Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted*

among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." This is no mere self-aggrandizement but a message of comfort for a vulnerable people, reassuring them that they are safe with him. The most extensive passages in which God speaks highly of himself are found in the second half of Isaiah (e.g. 42:14-17, 45:18-23). But why? Because God's great name was being blasphemed among the nations by his association with a powerless people (Isaiah 52:5). They may be downtrodden, captive, and weak, but their God is sovereign over the nations of the world, he is mighty to save them and gather them together again.

In short, even though the truth of Proverbs 27:2 is intended for people, God chooses to apply it to himself. He does not praise himself, but evokes the praise of others – of his own people Israel, yes, but also of strangers and foreigners. Why does God do that? Part of the answer is simply that God commands respect (Leviticus 10:3, 16:2, 22:3); we owe him love (Deuteronomy 11:13, Matthew 22:37). It is not the task of a king to praise himself but of his subjects to praise him (Malachi 1:14). God made us for his praise (Psalm 22:3; Belgic Confession, Article 12, Lord's Day 3, Q.A. 6). Another part of the answer, perhaps, is that God leads by example: as we live out the truth of Proverbs 27:2, we're being renewed after the image of God himself, learning to reflect his character. Still another part of the answer may be that God reveals himself to be entirely different from Satan: he's not proud, attention-seeking or power hungry the way Satan is, and he reveals himself in such a way that we could never confuse his qualities with those of the devil.

All of this helps us to understand our Saviour better. The Lord Jesus left behind heavenly glory and humbled himself by taking on flesh and blood. When we think of his humiliation we think especially of his human nature. Yet we should not think that depriving himself of glory is foreign to his divine nature. Scripture does not give us the picture of a God who needs to praise himself all the time in order to feel fulfilled, nor of a God who lives in splendid isolation with the angels because human praise just isn't good enough. No, we read of a covenant God who relates to sinful people, who wants their lips to praise him, and who is longsuffering when that praise does not come. It is this God who comes to us in Jesus Christ. Our Saviour did not praise himself, but he did receive praise and worship from others, also from the lips of children (Psalm 8:2; Matthew 21:15, 16). Christ fulfilled Proverbs 27:2 when he said in John 8,

"I am not seeking glory for myself ... my Father ... is the one who glorifies me."

He also said that he brings glory to the Father (John 17:4). So the Father glorifies the Son, and the Son the Father. There, in the blessed communion of the Trinity, we see the perfect truth of Proverbs 27.

A word of caution

Even at the basic human level, Proverbs 27 gives a wise word of caution: *"Let another praise you, not yourself."* Don't toot your own horn. But the caution becomes much more urgent if God holds even himself to this principle. If the one who deserves all glory and praise in heaven and on earth is willing to wait and to work for others to give it to him, how do we, who deserve no praise at all, dare to snatch it for ourselves? We would then put ourselves ahead of God.

One last comment: Proverbs 27:2 gets a new twist in the New Testament age. In 2 Corinthians 10:18, Paul writes, *"It is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends."* In other words, let the Lord be the stranger who praises you. If he was willing to wait and to work for you to praise him, how much more should you be willing to wait to receive your commendation from him!

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