

# Learning from the Psalms: Praise the Lord!

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Psalm 150

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Several weeks ago we began this series with Psalm 1: “Happy are those who meditate on God and His ways day and night; they will prosper in all that they do...” This morning, the last Sunday before Lent begins, we finish up with this culminating and final psalm 150: “Praise the LORD!—Hallelujah!” Our word “Hallelujah” translates the Hebrew “hallel”, to praise, “Yah” or “Yahweh”—an OT name for God. And our name for these 150 prayers, or “psalms,” comprising our book of Psalms, also come from the Greek word for “praise.”

Now you may be thinking the Holy Spirit has engaged in some seriously false advertising, to have the editors of the Bible use this name “Praises” for the book of Psalms—especially given that the psalms have many more prayers of lament and sadness than of praise. If you read through the Psalms regularly, or at all, you know they express just about every human emotion: fear and doubt, gratitude and guilt and repentance, betrayal and blessing, the absence of God, the faithful covenant presence of God, the history of God’s people Israel, protection and vulnerability, salvation and sadness, pain and prosperity, envy and vengeance and valor; God’s saving hand in history—these are a few examples of what gets to be a comprehensive list!

By no means are there more psalms of praise than these other things...yet the collection of Psalms ends with a crescendo of the last five all dedicated to praising God. But this Psalm 150 is unique even among these others. (For example, I count 16 reasons given to praise God in Psalm 146: God is your Creator, God has saved you, God takes care of the powerless, God is gracious, God protects Jerusalem, to name five.) Here in the final Psalm there’s no list of attributes, no litany of why we should: just the command, stated 13 times in 6 verses: “Praise the Lord with every instrument in the orchestra; if you are breathing right now, then praise God!”

I suppose we all have days when it seems the bigger problem is not so much that it sounds like false advertising to name all these prayers the “Book of Praises”—the bigger problem is that sometimes the product advertised, “praising God,” does not meet our needs and it’s not something we much feel like rushing out to buy. Or practice. Who feels like praising God when you cannot find your way, when loss is your constant companion, when every step you take seems to be a difficult one,

when all those laments and all that frustration and pain expressed in the Psalms are far more in tune with how you have been feeling than this holy-sounding but hopelessly naïve command to “Praise the Lord.”

Let’s consider two different ways that praising God may rescue us...then we’ll quit fiddling around. Let’s consider how praising God will rescue you from personal pettiness and loneliness, and will rescue you from a too-small perspective.

I Praising God may rescue you from personal pettiness. Our default position in this life is to see things from our own personal perspective. For example: as you listen to the news from Egypt and the Middle East, are you considering how God may want to be using or may even be guiding these events—that God is the One who “looks down from heaven; He watches all the inhabitants of the earth...A king is not saved by his great army...” [Ps 33:14-17] When you’re sitting on a plane on the runway at John Wayne Airport are you thinking how it is God the Creator who has thought up the laws of physics and aerodynamics and created this world of atmospheric pressure and potential energy stored in molecules of refined petroleum in which jets can fly from here to Chicago—are you thinking of how this is an opportunity to pray and to praise God? (I usually am not thinking this way, either, when I’m stranded out there—but behind everything is God, not just behind “spiritual” things, and we tend to forget.

Maybe Psalm 150, telling us to praise God “just because,” is set as the culminating psalm because it’s where we will all end up as we continue to pray our way through all the psalms, and all the events and moods and depths of our lives. As you continue to remember the living God, present and approachable behind and in every phase of your life, and as you continue to pray in the Holy Spirit, you become someone whose life goes deeper. It’s easy to deal with alienation and rejection and doubt and failed relationships on the surface—people have no real choice about that—but you who pray to God will keep going deeper. Keep going deeper until you come to discover that in the end all your genuine prayers lead you to praising God. This final psalm is telling you to keep praying to God, keep trusting in God, until in the end you are praising God. Keep taking your life to God; keep praying:

through laughter and tears, through triumph and tragedy, through what you think you understand and what you know you never will. Keep praying in good times and in bad. Praising God does not come naturally in a day or a week or a year or maybe even in a decade—but in the same way all the psalms (most of them “downers,” by the way, not ending with praise at all) lead to this final one calling us to praise God, all your life of praying will lead you to become the person who praises God to the end—and beyond. [This insight comes from Eugene Peterson’s *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*]

Willingness, and desire, to praise God requires the same dimension shift which defines the foundation of the spiritual life from beginning to end. I am not the end or goal of my life. The Israelite’s self-understanding expressed by Moses, and still taught, handed down from parents to babes 3000 years later: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.” [Dt 6:4] Or the first of the beatitudes Jesus taught His disciples: “Blessed are you when you are poor in spirit...”—because then I can do business together with you. [Mt 5:3]

The end and goal of the spiritual life may well be this self-abandoned, totally-submitted self lost in praise before God without reserve or calculation or crossed fingers or expectation of return. (Augustine observed “A Christian ought to be one big “Hallelujah” from head to toe!”) This attitude of joy, of trust before God despite our feelings or our circumstances is exactly what does not come in a day or a year. I am so glad that we have a number of seniors in this congregation who radiate the “joy of the Lord” and the peace of Christ each day. Just think: to be 80, 90 years old and more—and to have endured no end of bad news and loss and challenges in that span of time...and yet our seniors are some of the most upbeat and joyful people I’ve ever been around. Isn’t it wonderful to be part of this faith family with them?

It might be useful to note a negative example, to make the positive more clear. Listen to the account from M Scott Peck as he describes a therapy session with one Charlene who had been brought up with faith in Christ, and had then graduated on to something for more sophisticated and intelligent people:

“Everything seems meaningless,” Charlene complained to [him, Peck.]

“What is the meaning of life?” I asked her with innocence.

“How should I know?” she replied with obvious irritation.

“You are a dedicated, religious person, Charlene. Surely your religion must have

something to say about the meaning of life?”

“You’re trying to trap me,” she countered. “I am not a Christian. My religion speaks of love, not meaning.”

“Well, what do Christians say is the meaning of life?... You were raised in the Christian Church. You spent almost two years as a professional teacher of Christian doctrine”, I went on...”Surely you’re not so dumb as to be unaware of what Christians say is the meaning of life, the purpose of human existence.”

“We exist to give glory to God...The purpose of our life is to glorify God” she said in a sullen monotone as if this alien catechism were extracted from her at gunpoint. [She must once have been a Presbyterian: in their Westminster Confession/Shorter Catechism this is the first answer: “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.”]

“Well?”

There was a brief silence. For a moment I thought she might cry—the one time in our work together. “I cannot do it. There’s no room for me in that. That would be my death,” she said in a quavering voice. Then...her choked-back sobs turned into a roar. “I don’t want to live for God. I will not. I want to live for me. For my own sake!”

Charlene walked out in the middle of that session...I felt a terrible pity for her. “Oh God, she’s so alone” was all I [M Scott Peck] could whisper.” [from *People of the Lie*]

It’s a great irony, but this principle has not changed since the time of Moses and before. We become petty and lonely when we refuse to worship, and offer our lives and our praise, to the living God. As Jesus taught it, “If any want to become My followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me. Because those who want to save their life will lose it, and those willing to lose their life for My sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” [Mark 8:34-35]

(Maybe, in light of all this, it wouldn’t be such a great idea to declare next Sunday “No Excuse Sunday” in order to make it especially attractive for everyone to come worship and sing praise to God the first Sunday of Lent... what do you think about the church which advertised for their “No Excuse Sunday:” “Cots will be placed in the entry hall for all those who say “Sunday is my only day to sleep in.” There will be a special section with rented lounge chairs for those who claim the pews are too hard. We will be giving out protective steel helmets for those joking, “the roof would cave in if I ever went to church.” Blankets will be available for those who think it’s too cold in here. Scorecards will be given out to those who wish to keep track of, and deduct points from, the relative flaws

and weaknesses of all those hypocrites they know who worship here. We will pass out “Stamp Out Stewardship Now” buttons for those convinced the church is always asking for money. One quadrant will be planted with trees and grass for those who prefer to worship God in nature, and there’ll be a driving range cage for those who can find God on the golf course just as easily as at church. The sanctuary will feature poinsettias and Easter lilies for those who might be uncomfortable to learn that the church is not decorated with them all the time. See you there!”

II Praising God will also help rescue you from a too-small perspective. The Psalm moves in a universal direction, closing with “Let everything that has breath praise the LORD!”—every Israelite and Gentile, every man, woman and child—every fish and bird and mammal and everything alive! The Bible itself moves in a universal direction; the final book, Revelation, tells how myriads of various angels and elders and symbolic beings and people from every tribe and nation will be there ceaselessly and joyfully praising the Lamb and praising God.

And yet...we are conditioned to think all that is not real; that coming into this peaceful sanctuary to worship God and give Him honor and praise on Sunday morning is somehow a retreat from the hard realities “out there” where there are people in prisons and unemployment and crime and violence and crooked politics and an astronomical federal deficit and catastrophic man-made global warming and instability in the Middle East and challenges as far as the geo-synchronous satellites can see.

God’s Reality is that prosperity and happiness come not from piling up more treasure or becoming more sophisticated consumers, but from aligning our lives and wills with the will of God. Our false contemporary reality is that of “Radical Autonomy”: the view of the “good life” as the life where you don’t have to do what you don’t want to do; where “success” means you have reached the stage where you can be totally self-centered and accountable to no one other than yourself. The driving philosophical question becomes “Am I happy?” (It’s not that Charlene had the wrong view of life—it’s just that she wasn’t very good at it.)

But instead, hear the word of the Lord: “You are not your own. You have been bought with a price!” [1 Cor 6:19] “Praise the Lord!”

I have enjoyed the privilege of spending time and learning from our friends Daniel Okabe and his father, Bishop Patrick Okabe, who is now visiting from Uganda. (Lord knows Uganda has big problems; it’s not that I would want to trade places. I am very grateful to God to be an

American!) A few of us joined in the Worship Service last week at the Los Angeles Mission at which Patrick preached to a few hundred people who were or have recently been homeless and living on the street. It was extremely inspiring to be worshipping God in that setting, and I hope each of you is planning to be worshipping and praising God here Sunday March 27 when Patrick will be preaching to us in this setting—and I hope you are also planning to come to the luncheon and presentation immediately following up in Mertz Hall.

To be around Patrick and Daniel is to become aware that they are constantly praising God—whether during worship or driving in the car and simply talking. They have lived in a land where it is crystal clear to them that God is their Source; the economy and the government and the education system in Uganda are not the source of their blessings—Patrick was mentioning how he never owned a single pair of shoes until he was in high school. (You had to be wealthy in Uganda to wear shoes.) How freely and readily they praise God in and for every circumstance. Perhaps it’s easier for them, not having been born and raised in this false reality in which we all live every day. I don’t know.

It may be that they are able to learn something from all of us when they are here, just as I have learned from being around them. I hope so. (My point is simply that they show me a different attitude, a different approach to trusting God and praising God. Their perspective is different from mine; they help me understand in a delightful way that praising God is a powerful antidote to this outlook of Radical Autonomy in which you and I have been raised.) I cannot be congratulating myself on a lifestyle well-earned and well-deserved, and at the same time abandoning myself in unstinting and unceasing praise to God.

Part of my too-small perspective is the sense that how I happen to be feeling is all-important. Praising God also rescues me from the tyranny of my moods and feelings. What if I don’t really feel like praising God today? What if I feel I would be a hypocrite if I were to praise God when I don’t really feel like it this morning? In response, the Psalmist, and the Scriptures, say over and over again, “I don’t care whether you feel like it or not. Praise God!” If you can put fog on a mirror, then praise God!

The truth is that God has created us; God has given us everything we need; God has redeemed us and invites us into eternal life. Our core response, our honest and healthy response, therefore, is to praise God. (Anything less, whether we feel it or not, is a result of a warped and too-small reality.) Feelings are important servants—but they are terrible masters when it comes to the spiritual

life. If we waited until we felt like loving our neighbor we'd be waiting a long time. If we waited until we felt like loving God we might be waiting a long time. If we waited until we felt like praising God there might be very little praising going on. (It is another kind of false reality which tells us it is "inauthentic" to do what we don't feel like doing. The fact is that our feelings are notoriously unreliable; following our feelings, apart from obedience to the will of God, is exactly what has gotten most people into the mess they're in. The Scriptures have almost nothing to say about how we feel. They tell us what to do, and they tell us to obey—until our feelings come alive. Backwards—"let's obey God, let's praise God when we feel like it"—will never get us anywhere we really want to be.) So Praise the Lord. Anyway!

It's true that praising God will rescue you from personal pettiness; that if you keep praying to God and become a person of prayer then your prayers will ultimately become praise. It's true that praising God will rescue you from a too-small reality, and from being held hostage to your own feelings.

It's also true that I could explain some of the benefits of breathing. And it would make no sense to do so.

We don't worship God, and praise God, because we think we get some benefits out of the deal. We get some benefits out of breathing, too! We don't weigh the cost-benefit analysis and then decide to praise God because we have concluded it benefits good old "number one."

We praise God because He has given us life and breath and He is worthy and there is no higher or truer purpose for our life and breath than to give Him praise. That's all.

Let every one and every thing that has breath praise the LORD!

## Psalm 150

150:1 Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament!

2 Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

3 Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp!

4 Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!

5 Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

6 Let everything that breathes praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!