

Nine Psalms: Praise Psalms 148 & 150

Preface:

Friends! This is the last psalm that we'll talk about for awhile. I'd love feedback on this series, as long as it's encouraging and positive. Kidding. I really would like to know if looking at, reflecting on, hearing, talking about these Psalms for the past couple of months has been helpful or not, and what you think might have made it more useful. So if there's feedback, please pass it on.

Today we're talking about some Praise Psalms, Psalm 148 and 150. Next week we'll have a Thanksgiving message, and after that we'll move into Advent and our season of remembering Jesus' first arrival and looking forward to his second.

Today's message is simple, really straightforward, so that's a relief, right?

Let me pray for us.

Prayer

Introduction:

Today, though, these Psalms of Praise. It's obvious why these get called that: The entire point of these psalms is to get us who hear them to Praise God. They are calls to hallelujah.

The word “hallelujah” is a word borrowed from the Hebrew phrase, “Praise the Lord” or “Praise God.” “Hallelujah” is the phrase “Praise God.” Halallu; praise. Jah; God. This kind of word, taken from another language, is called a transliteration. Hallelujah; Praise God.

Social:

And Hallelujah is a social word. I want to point that out. Christians often say--I often say--“hallelujah!” as a response to something I hear about. I hear about something great God has done, and say, “Praise God!” I often mean something like “I choose to praise God for the news that you’ve just shared with me.” But really, “Hallelujah” “Praise God” Is an exhortation to someone else do what you’re feeling in your gut. It’s a call to someone to praise God, just like you are. To say it is to invite someone else to join you praising God. Does this make sense? I just want to make sure no one hallelujah’s alone. Not really; we’re called to nurture a personal relationship with God. But to say “Praise God!” or “Hallelujah” is to invite someone else to join you in your praise. It’s invitation to a social activity, a moment of shared attention on who God is and what God has done.

But this begs the question: What’s praise?

Praise:

Praise is this: It's to honor and ascribe worth to something. To honor and ascribe worth to something. This means some things. It means using language, most of all, although now and then we can make instruments sing, right?

That "hālel" word that starts "hallelujah?" It meant, originally, simply to make some noise. To make noise about God, squawk about God. To cheer God, the way we cheer a team as they run on the field, or yell a whoop for a friend when they're celebrated for something.

It's making noise, and the noise means something, it means that what we're noisy about is worth honor, is worth our esteem, is worth our attention.

Praising God:

So praise is making noise, and the noise means something, it means that what we're noisy about is worth honor, is worth our esteem, is worth our attention. And this is true of God.

But praise of God is, as far as the Bible reckons it, the right place, the best place, for our praise to be directed, because God is, well, God.

As the Psalmist puts it in Psalm 148:

***5 Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for at his command they were created,***

**6 and he established them for ever and ever—
he issued a decree that will never pass away.
13 Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for his name alone is exalted;
his splendor is above the earth and the
heavens.**

God made all creation; creation didn't make itself. God's splendor is above the earth and the heavens; not equal to or below it. There's something about God that's different, fundamentally, than something about everything else in Creation. The Bible often talks about this as God's "glory," God's unique worth, unique place in reality. Nothing matches God, and we praise God for it.

Words:

There isn't just one word in Hebrew that gets translated "praise," although this "hālel" is the basic one. All of them revolve around the idea of acknowledging how God is uniquely worth our honor and esteem. The same thing is true of the New Testament: there isn't just one word that gets translated "praise." The idea of giving voice to God's excellence comes up over and over. Again, the words are speech words: "glorifying" God, "praising" God, "blessing God" or "giving thanks to God."

Let me speak to this last one, because sometimes when we're guided by, oh, the allure of categorization, we

can feel like praising God is very different from thanking God. But if they are different, they are different in the way a root is different from a stem; they're part of the same thing. I've always found the efforts to differentiate "praise" from "thanks" a little, oh, forced. Because for me to thank God for doing something that I believe only God can do or has done is to give honor and esteem to God. If only God can do what God has done, and I'm giving thankful voice to what God has done, I'm inherently praising who God is. Beyond all this, if only God can do what God has done, and I'm praising God for who God is, thanking him is intrinsic, fundamental to what we're doing: Our dependance, as created ones in need of God's provision and intervention, leads us to honor the one who provides and intercedes for us. We know about God through his faithful actions to us; our thanks is our honor.

When Paul, in Romans, introduces the basic failure of the Gentiles, he says "they neither glorified God nor gave thanks to him." Different translations will put this different ways, of course, but the point is that these two things--Giving voice to the honor, esteem, and worth God has and thanking God--are linked together. We can't really separate them. Faithfulness is honoring God and giving him thanks.

Check-in:

How are we at praising God? I mean, we've got songs

we sing, hymns we hymn, we include, when we gather together, a time of giving thanks for what God's done, which reveals and reminds us of the special honor and esteem we ought to show God. I've been a part of congregations that are noisier than ours, you know? A little more cheery, shouty, who really Shout to the Lord when they sing Shout to the Lord. But there isn't a better or worse way to praise God. There is only Good and Bad; Good is doing it all, and bad is not doing it. We all have personal preferences; we all have interests and opinions, but these things aren't, by and large, moral; they are simply comfortable or uncomfortable. Are we, as a community, praising God well? Are we, as individuals, glorifying God well? Or do we neglect to honor and esteem God, whether in our personal prayers or with others?

And I honestly think it's really, really hard to be bad at praising God if we're giving any attention at all to our walk with Christ. Because as we lean into the Spirit, as we read Scripture, as we gather together, we are given just a flood of opportunities to give voice to the honor and esteem and worth of God. We are positioned, by times together, by the Spirit, and by Scripture, to remember and give our voice to what God has done, why God is worth cheering on about who God is.

A lack of praise in our lives isn't just an oversight; it's a sign that our hearts and minds, our souls and strength, simply aren't attuned that much to God. For

God's People, praise necessarily flows from our relationship with God. The more intimate our relationship with God and God's People, the more we'll find ourselves praising God. This is just one of those things that happens. If it's not happening, it's a sign that our relationship with God, at the moment, needs nurtured and attended to.

But honestly, when we think about the mystery and wonders of creation, when we think about the capability and wisdom and love of God, or about the truth and wonder in the world that we can explore we probably say "Hallelujah." When we consider the joy of flexing our own skill or the world to come that we look forward to, where death and shame are put to death, or the people who love us, who God made and loves, too, we probably say "Hallelujah." When we are in awe of something, impressed by something, in touch with the deep logic and emotion of the world, I suspect we turn to praise the same way that, in tragedy, we turn to prayer, saying "Oh My God." Hallelujah comes out of us, it comes out of us, when we consider God and the wonders, as it's put, he hath wrought.

What Praise Does: Individual

And it comes out of us when we gather together, and sing and say the things we say together, "in," as Psalm 150 puts it, "the assembly of his faithful people."

There's something in our willingness to say the things we say together now, regardless of how fully our attention is on what we say, that can bolster our faith when it's weak. Praising God alongside others, regularly, is a scaffold for us when our attention is so quickly pulled from one thing to another, and pulled away from God as it goes.

So, frankly, doing what we're doing now, when we gather together like this and give God the credit God deserves, it's a little engine for our faith, a little jog for a memories, and a reminder for each of us when, though the course of just days, we've forgotten what it means to be a part of God's People or a recipient of God's love.

What Praise Does: Church

And "glorifying God and giving thanks to him" together, as we're doing, it doesn't just strengthen us individually, it strengthens us together.

Psalm 148 ends in an odd way. This was read to us:

***14 And he has raised up for his people a horn,
the praise of all his faithful servants,
of Israel, the people close to his heart.***

Another translation puts it this way:

**God raised the strength of his people,
the praise of all his faithful ones—
that’s the Israelites,
the people who are close to him.**

“Horn” in the first passage I read is symbolic for strength; this is, oh, Israelite poetic convention. But the implication in this last verse is that the strength of God’s People is their praise.

***14 And he has raised up for his people a horn,
the praise of all his faithful servants,
of Israel, the people close to his heart.***

Strength, for the people close to God’s heart is their praise. The point is that somehow, in turning their focus away from themselves and toward God, cheering God on, and giving voice to the honor and esteem that God uniquely should get, this becomes a strength for them. And I think there’s something in this, that praising God together is good for a community of people. It strengthens them together, gives them hope, and a shared sense of identity. Worshipping God together, with the “honor” and “thankfulness” Paul describes brings a sense of solidarity and purpose to a community of people.

This was particularly important for Israel, of course, the tiny little group of people surrounded by age-old

antagonists, but it's true in various ways for all of those groups of people who praise God together. It's true for us.

I mean, you can only say the things we say together, sing the things we sing together, read and recite the things we read and recite together for so long, these things about God's glory, before you realize that you're sharing in something with others whether you want to be, or not. We're a part of something bigger than ourselves--maybe not much bigger, in our case, but big enough. We have a corporate reputation, corporate purposes, corporate identity, and the strength, the sense of agency and impact, that these things provide.

To be a part of a community of God's People who praises God together is discover strength in things you wouldn't have imagined. We find ourselves praying for people who we wouldn't have chosen to become invested in, but discover, over time, that God's faithfulness to them feels like faithfulness to us. It's to praise God for the goodness he's shown another person, and have everyone's faith bolstered for it. We cheer God on; we make noise about what God's done, and we do it together. Our little bit, that we give out of thanks to God along with others--whether that is a little talent, a little cash, a little prayer, a little time--that little bit, joined with others', becomes something bigger and more reflective of God's own mercy and

glory than anything we could do alone.

There are few things more weak, I think, than a community of saints who no longer praise God together. Anything can take them out, and usually does.

What Praise Does: Creation

And if giving voice to what God deserves can wake us up to what God *actually deserves*, and praising God together becomes a source of strength for our community, a binding agent that positions us for excellence, then praising God also reminds us of our smallness.

What I mean is that praising God reminds us that we're not the center of the universe, but God is. And we are part of a great wide creation that, for all our advancement, our marvels, our wisdom, we haven't really explored much of at all. When the Psalmists call "hallelujah" to the hills, to the heavenly host, to the heights and depths, they're giving voice to the truth that everything, everything, everything comes from God, and any goodness or beauty, love or truth we ever experience is a derivative, a trickle down, of the great goodness of God that made it all, holds it all together, and will remake it, too, once death is vanquished. We are small, but not insignificant.

And if we follow the Psalmists' lead, we'll realize that the praise God deserves is more than all God's People could give, that if we could get the trees to clap their hands, and the mountains to sing, it wouldn't be enough. All creation could join in cheering on God, and the cheer wouldn't be loud enough. But we ourselves, God's People, we at least have to cheer, have to give voice to the work of God, because, in the end, it's what we were made for.

We are the ones who God has made known "the riches of his glory," who have received the mercy of God, and been brought into His People. We're God's children, "heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ," the ones who expect to share in Jesus' glory. The truth is that our praise of God, *now* is limited. Our cheering, our esteem, our respect and honor and thankfulness, it's, oh, it's provisional. It's not enough. And the reason it's not enough is because we die, because death is loose in creation and it wasn't meant to be. And until Jesus returns and ends the great interrupter Death, our praise is a shadow, an appetizer of what's to come. Creation itself, Paul says, longs for an end to "its bondage to decay," that it might be "brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." Everything needs resurrection, and until it comes, we praise God because only God can bring it, only Christ has experienced it, only the Spirit has enabled it. And after it comes, praise and thanks will be, I think, simply what we do when we do everything else; something

like breathing. It will be common without turning cheap; accessible and still valuable. Right now, any praise we offer together, or call the world to offer around us, is a rare thing, and it's worth a great price; in the world to come it'll be less rare, as common as dirt, but worth even more, because God will have proven Himself utterly and completely faithful. To live will be to cheer God on.

Conclusion:

Until then, we say Hallelujah. "Praise the Lord." We remind ourselves to do it, because we need reminding. And when we say the things we say together, pray and praise and bless and give thanks the way we do, we are reminded of who God is. We are reminded of what God has brought us into and helped us build, this congregation of ours. And we're reminded that we are so, so significant, and yet so small; we are not self-created or self-sustained, but created and sustained by the God of love, power, and wisdom, who deserves our praise.

Praise the Lord. Hallelujah. It's our charge and our sustenance, our strength and our calling. It will never let us down, but to give it up is to give up more than we can bear to lose. How much of our speech, our noise, is praise?