

Advent Psalms | Longing for the Humble King

“Happy Are Those Whose Help Is the God of Jacob”

Psalm 146

12.24.23 10:00AM

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! ² I will praise the LORD while I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being. ³ Do not trust in princes, In mortal man, in whom there is no salvation. ⁴ His spirit departs, he returns to the earth; In that very day his thoughts perish. ⁵ How blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, Whose hope is in the LORD his God, ⁶ Who made heaven and earth, The sea and all that is in them; Who keeps faith forever; ⁷ Who executes justice for the oppressed; Who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free. ⁸ The LORD opens the eyes of the blind; The LORD raises up those who are bowed down; The LORD loves the righteous; ⁹ The LORD protects the strangers; He supports the fatherless and the widow, But He thwarts the way of the wicked. ¹⁰ The LORD will reign forever, Your God, O Zion, to all generations. Praise the LORD!

To prepare us to receive/welcome Jesus Christ this Advent Season, we've been looking at Psalms suggested in *The Common Lectionary* (a three-year cycle of weekly readings used in a variety of churches worldwide).

Today's 146th Psalm is first in a series of five concluding hymns of praise closing the Book of Psalms each beginning and ending with the word “hallelujah” (“hallel” = praise and “jah” is an abbreviation of *Yahweh*).

There are TWO IMPERATIVES or commands in the Psalm – one positive command (repeated in vv. 1 & 10) and one negative – something to DO and something to AVOID.

The negative – the thing to avoid – seems, at first, to be out of place... I want to show that it's NOT out of place, but it is, in fact, the main theme of the Psalm. And WHEN we see the relationship between these two dissimilar commands it unlocks some things in the spiritual life that lead to real happiness... So, this is a happiness sermon; my Christmas gift to you!

Let's look at:

- 1) TWO STRUGGLES in understanding this Psalm**
- 2) TWO SOURCES of confidence in the Psalm**
- 3) TWO SERVICES this Psalm provides**

If you had to read the psalm and then immediately identify the main idea... you'd probably say, PRAISE. It's a “Hallel” Psalm, a praise psalm, that begins and ends with this call to praise. The word (praise) is repeated three times in the first verse – no brainer! Praise is the theme!

Then you come to v. 3 where you meet the OTHER command, the negative, something to shun... “DO NOT trust in princes...” and that seems very different like it doesn’t belong. In fact, it seems to introduce, as we saw last week, seems to introduce politics into a hymn of praise to God – seems to mix politics and religion. “Don’t trust in political leaders; you can’t depend on princes; they’re untrustworthy.” Nothing to do with praise!

So... is this about politics or about God? Is it about our obligation to praise God OR our tendency to trust in princes and presidents... putting inordinate confidence in our lawmakers as if our happiness depended on them?

So that’s the first of two struggles: what’s the main theme of the 146th Psalm: to praise God OR stay a little suspicious of authorities and leaders?

The second struggle is this matter of God mandating that we praise Him. We try to be good and holy people; we must be somehow missing the point, but most people who read the Bible regularly have at least wondered (quietly!) why God needs/wants our praises.

And here’s where our old friend can help us. C.S. Lewis, in his *Reflections on the Psalms*, has a whole chapter devoted to this question – how can God command us to praise Him? Let me summarize two ideas I’ve found super helpful.

First, if you look directly at the sun, it compels you to squint. AND in a parallel sense, if you look at something beautiful, it compels you to praise that thing. The more beautiful the object, the stronger the compulsion. Therefore, if you look at the One who is NOT only the Source of all beauty but the One who IS Beauty Himself – you’ll find praise irresistible.

Second, as the Bible, and especially *The Psalms*, calls us to praise God to others – i.e., to commend or (in modern terms) to give God the Highest Reviews (5 stars!) to OTHERS... we should see that this is always what we do when we find something to be Good, True or Beautiful. We can not simply privately admire the thing – we feel inwardly moved to tell someone in the hope of sharing the experience with another.

Here’s how Lewis puts it, “... *I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.*”

What he means is – IF we see a gorgeous sunset, we can’t FULLY ENJOY that sunset until someone else enjoys it with us. It completes the experience and until we praise the restaurant, the plumber, the car, the movie, the book, the baby to someone else, until we say, “*Have you EVER seen such a cute baby?!*” and until we hear the reply, “*I gotta admit: that baby IS adorable!*” Until another joins us, it’s only half an enjoyment!

In inviting us to praise Him, in calling and commanding us, God is only saying, *“I want, I call, I command you to have FULL delight – I made you for fullest delight!”*

And... since God IS the Source and Essence of Beauty, there’s NOTHING else more beautiful for God to behold than Himself... So, in calling us to ponder Him ... God TOO is consummating the experience by sharing it with us! As Lewis concludes this paragraph, he quotes *The Presbyterian (Westminster) Catechism*: “The Scotch catechism says that man’s chief end is ‘to glorify God and enjoy Him forever’. But we shall then know that these are the same thing. Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him.”

The Baptist minister, John Piper, took this and formed a kind of spiritual calculus: *“God is glorified in us to the degree that we are satisfied in Him.”*

And this answers the first struggle too: *Is this Psalm about praising God OR about our tendency to trust in government?* Well... yeah! I mean whatever we TRUST and find to be worthy of confidence, we want to praise, recommend and endorse to others. The theme is trusting God; if we trust Him, we’ll find Him strikingly faithful/trustworthy, and we’ll praise Him!

This Psalm holds out two sources of confidence: God and Princes. When it comes to human leaders, governments, presidents and princes – the psalm gives us reasons for NOT putting our ultimate trust in them, namely, they’re mortal and cannot save, *“Do not trust in princes, in mortal man, in whom there is no salvation. His spirit departs, he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish.”* There’s no salvation in humans. We cannot be trusted to fix what’s really broken in the human race. We’re fleeting. We are made of dust and to dust we will return (Adam/Adamah).

The word “PRINCES” is a metonymy – i.e., substitutes for anything we trust to save us from the real problem but that cannot cure that problem. It stands for anything that’s NOT the LORD. Your husband can’t save you, your wife, your job, your bank account, following the rules, being really cautious/careful; partying can’t save you so don’t put ultimate confidence there – it’ll end in shame.

But on the other hand – *“Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God.”* (HE is Creator) *“Who made heaven and earth”*, (HE is a solid rock of dependability v. 6) *“Who keeps faith forever”* (HE is Judge and HE alone discerns what’s good, true and beautiful v. 7) *“Who executes justice for the oppressed”* (and HE sustains and provides) v. 7 *“Who gives food to the hungry.”*

Then the writer adds seven categories of the LORD’s special concern: The Lord frees the prisoners... opens the eyes of the blind... raises up the overwhelmed... loves the righteous (i.e., protects those who are persecuted for doing right), strangers, the orphan and the widow.

These are God’s top priorities. These are the values of His Kingdom and reign...BUT (eighth category) v. 9, *“He thwarts the wicked...”* If God is against you, who can be FOR you? Let go of wickedness like it’s radioactive. It’ll be killing you as long as you hold it. There WILL be a reckoning.

You'll remember that John the Baptist was imprisoned and he was troubled that Jesus was NOT bringing the heat! Where's the "Great and Terrible Day of the Lord" that Messiah would execute? I don't see it! Are YOU the Messiah or should we expect someone else?"

And Jesus told the messengers, *"Go tell John what you've seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them.* (Luke 7.22)

Jesus is quoting Isaiah 61 et al – which He'd quoted at the synagogue in Nazareth... He's saying, *"I'm doing the job description of the Messiah."* Our Psalm 146 includes the same basic categories of needy people and Jesus Christ did literally feed the hungry (John 6) and straightened the bent down (Luke 13.11), opened blind eyes (Matt 9.27)... But what about that 8th Category in today's psalm, "Where did Jesus thwart the wicked and execute justice and where's the 'Great and Terrible Day of the Lord'" (Joel 2.1, 11, 31 et al)?

Well, He did oppose the religious professionals and addressed them with bold love (Matthew 23 et al) ... cleansed the Temple (John 2 et al) exposed their wicked oppression and hypocrisy... But John the Baptist associated Messiah with judgment... "Where's the great and awesome day of the Lord and the JUDGMENT on sin? Cousin, I thought You'd be comin' in HOT!!"

And yet Jesus Christ not only brought judgment but suffered judgment... on the Cross. The Prophet Joel wrote, *"The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes."* (Joel 2.31) Jesus Christ inaugurated the Last Days – He took our darkness and the justice that His people deserve!

The resurrection of a dead Man proved that His work of atonement for the sin did indeed satisfy God's standard of justice and paid for my sins. Then pours out the Spirit – first on the Jews who believed and THEN on the unclean Gentiles – salvation for anyone, from any nationality. Anyone who calls on the Name of Jesus Christ by faith is instantly declared holy in the sight of God – forgiven and occupied by God's very Heart, His Spirit moves in and starts the liberation from the inside out.

AND, there's this beatitude, a declaration of happiness attached to this (v.5) *"Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God."*

Jacob wrestled the Messenger of God's Presence and Jacob said, *"I won't let You go 'til You bless me!"* and NOW, that blessing, forgiveness and the Holy Spirit is given to everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ. We are offered HAPPINESS... because we find help and hope in Jacob's God, Jesus Christ.

Two ways this Psalm serves us: the guarantee of help and hope from the God of Jacob. We have found that Princes and Priests, doctors and therapists, advisors and spouses cannot SAVE us – *"in whom there IS*

no salvation.” They can make life better and bearable but can’t take away our guilt and our bad record – only Jesus Christ can help us in THAT way. His very Name means “salvation”!

In Him we have hope. We make our boast IN Him that we’re actually forgiven and that we have NEW LIFE by God’s Spirit. It’s a confidence NOT based on our feelings but on the historic resurrection of Jesus.

And WHEN we enjoy that help and hope – when we see what Jesus Christ has done for us and what the Spirit of God continues to do in and even through us, WHEN that vision of Jesus satisfies and sustains us – the Baby whose crib was a feeding trough, a platter on which was laid the Bread of Life – when we eat and soak in that – we are sweetly compelled to praise God – “What WONDROUS love is this! WOW!”

In that state of happiness – knowing that God has forgiven (even the sins we’ve NOT YET committed) we’re blessed, we’re happy. We’ve found hope and help in the God of Jacob.

It makes us want to help all these categories of people because to DO SO is in keeping with the values of God’s Kingdom.

We even want to tell others – from one beggar to another – “*Let me tell you where I found Bread – the God (v. 7) who gives bread to the hungry*”. We commend restaurants to others – why not boast about the One who gives the richest fare to feed our souls? (Isa 25.6ff) When you depend on Him, you find Him faithful and the happiness you experience in that moment is... outrageous... but your JOY will not be complete until you boast about this God to someone else and say (final words):

*“The Lord will reign forever, Your God, O Zion,
to all generations. **Praise the Lord!**”*

Q U O T E S

“But the most obvious fact about praise -- whether of God or anything -- strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise. ... The world rings with praise -- lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game. ... I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation... *The Scotch catechism says that man’s chief end is “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever”. But we shall then know that these are the same thing. Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him.*”

- C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1958), pp. 93–97