



Gospel / Life

Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

Study 8: Freed From Idolatry Into Worship And Joy

Praise the LORD.

*Praise the LORD from the heavens,
praise him in the heights above.*

Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his heavenly hosts.

Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars.

Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies.

Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created. He set them in place for ever and ever; he gave a decree that will never pass away.

Praise the LORD from the earth,

*you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,
lightning and hail,*

snow and clouds,

stormy winds that do his bidding,

you mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars,

wild animals and all cattle,

small creatures and flying birds,

kings of the earth and all nations,

you princes and all rulers on earth,

young men and maidens, old men and children.

Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his splendour is above the earth and the heavens. He has raised up for his people a horn, the praise of all his saints, of Israel, the people close to his heart.

Praise the LORD.

Hallelujah!!

Today we use the Hebrew word “Hallelujah!” commonly in our worship to exclaim joyfully our adoration of our great God and Saviour. Technically, the word is an *imperative* which should not be spoken to God Himself, but rather which we are to use to speak to one another. It means, “Praise the LORD!” or “Let’s praise the LORD!” and is a command and summons that God’s people join together to worship God. I’m fairly sure that we use it as a term by which we adore and praise God because this command to praise Him is not burdensome to us, but is rather the very joy of our hearts.

At the end of the Psalter, from Psalm 144 onwards, the dominant note of the psalms is one of praise. All prayer and meditation finally comes to climax in full-throttle praise of God for the triumph of all His gracious purposes in history. Moreover, we are set free to praise and worship God, and then, in our praising and worshipping of God we experience the saving, delivering work of the Lord even more.

What do the following psalms tell us about God’s character? And for what actions of God do they give thanks?

Psalm 144

Psalm 145

Psalm 146

Psalm 147

To praise the Lord with all that is within you is the ultimate experience for human beings. In fact, it is the ultimate experience of the whole creation! Praising God is a business that takes all our energies, but which, rather than exhausting those energies, will build in us in strength so that we grow in energy in our praising of Him. Psalm 150 seems to me to be the great climax of this as layer upon layer is added to the worship of God, as various musicians and dancers are called in to take part. If this is a picture of creation's destiny, it tells us that not only will all be music (Jonathan Edwards) but also we will all be "musicians", sounding out the music of joy in praise of God in our hearts with the particular way in which we have been given breath.

More too, the praise of God by His people is the means by which He executes triumph over all the enemies (Psalm 149). As the praise of God is in their mouths (vv. 1-5), the double-edged sword is in their hands, and the judgments of God work out in the world (vv. 6-9). And this victory is going on while they dance before Him, even as they sing in their beds (v. 5)! The praises of God come from those who have received His unexpected, surprising and wonderfully liberating grace! For He crowns the humble with salvation!

The Heart Set Free To Worship

Paul says in Romans 1:21-23 something quite devastating about the human race. We have refused the full-throttle worship of God that is described for us in the psalms. In fact, we have refused *any* worship of God, and developed substitute worship:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

In a couple of places in the Old Testament it is made clear that we are shaped into the image of what we worship. We are made for the worship of God by being made in His image. When we refuse that worship, the image becomes distorted. And what we worship in substitute for that starts to shape us, until finally we become like the idol substitute we have made. All failure to worship God truly leads finally to the degradation of human beings (see Rom. 1:24-32). Not only do we degrade ourselves but our false worship leads to the degradation of others, and to their being exploited by us for our own purposes, for we assume that they are no longer the image and glory of God.

Since our greatest joy is found in worshipping God, there is subsequent loss of joy in refusing that worship. That loss of joy is linked to the loss of glory and to the coming of shame that sin brings. It is unbearable for human beings. Idolatry is an attempt to find joy from something else, somewhere else other than God. Rather than the joy of being who we are by creation, this idolatrous joy comes from seemingly escaping what we have become in our rebellion and idolatry. But it is not real escape. It simply takes us further into the loss of joy. Sex, drugs, occult connection are obvious ways in which this illicit joy may be pursued, but the alternatives of goodness, "integrity", self-determination, a righteousness of our own are also illicit attempts at finding satisfaction apart from God.

The woman at the well in John 4 had perhaps sought her joy in "fulfilling relationships". This had turned out badly for her, a constant source of disappointment. Four husbands, five relationships on, she felt herself spiritually dry and thirsty. As

soon as Jesus had revealed his knowledge to her of her sad story (John 4:17-18), she immediately brought up the question of worship: where is the right place to worship? Jesus' words to her were wonderful. Firstly, the matter of worship is one in which the Father is seeking worshippers (v. 23). It is not really about us finding the right way to do it; it is about the Father finding us. Worship gone bad won't be made better by bad worshippers trying to do it right. In fact, because of our refusal to worship, we won't even be able to see the "right" approach to worship.

God the Father is seeking those who will worship Him in Spirit and in truth. This seeking is a saving seeking. He sends His Son to not merely gather worshippers but to create them! To remake them from out of their idolatry and darkness. How will this be? Verses from Psalms 144 ff tell us what Jesus, the Son of God does to gather these worshippers to the Father:

145:8-9; 14—"The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; He has compassion on all He has made... The LORD upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down."

146:7-9—"He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free, the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow..."

147:2-3—"The LORD builds up Jerusalem; He gathers the exiles of Israel. He heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds."

The Great High Priest

The praise, adoration and exaltation of God, which includes thanksgiving for His mercy and kindness to us, but which goes beyond that to stand in blissful awe of Who He is in Himself, is deep joy. But it is also a little foreign to us. Firstly, if we are fatally curved in on ourselves (see last week), standing outside ourselves to regard and bless Another will be impossible. And because there is still the presence of sin in us, this will be a constant battle for us. Secondly, we face a deep cultural problem. In Australia we find it very hard to praise and adore. We get all embarrassed when we do it. We feel very uncomfortable when we receive it! So we have developed a terrible back-handed way of praising one another by knocking and stirring. Even when we try to speak well of something, our speech has become flattened out so that all the rich joy is taken out.

We will need to ask God our Father for His help. Wonderful help has been given us! Jesus Christ our great high priest is the One who inducts us into the worship of the Father. He takes us alongside him in his worship of the Father. He does this by sending us the Holy Spirit. We don't know how to pray or how to worship, but the Spirit comes to our help. He joins us to Jesus Christ and includes us in on his worship. He fills us with the Lord's joy in His Father and his experience of the Father's joy in him. He teaches us to pray and worship along with Jesus. It is as though the Spirit sits us like little children on the lap of our great elder brother and he takes our hands and our hearts in his as he offers them up to the Father.