

The Way of Praise

Psalm 148

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Last week as we looked at Psalm 1, Randy preached looking at the wisdom and the path that the life offers. And that's certainly found in the rest and the refuge of Him Himself. And he introduced a key thing that we'll see time and time again as we look at the Psalms that these songs are prayers, they're petitions, they're crying out to the Lord. But it's also for the people of God to be invited into a space of discomfort, a discomfort of life that we experience every day, existential questions, tough circumstances, and all of these things as we look to the one who holds it all together, the one who is worthy of all of our praise that we find our refuge in God.

So, follow along as I read Psalm 148 this morning.

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts! Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the LORD! For he commanded and they were created. And he established them forever and ever; he gave a decree, and it shall not pass away.

Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Beasts and all livestock, creeping things and flying birds! Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and maidens together, old men and children!

Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his majesty is above earth and heaven. He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his saints, for the people of Israel who are near to him. Praise the LORD! [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Let us pray.

Father, we are grateful for your enduring love, your abundant grace. As we have heard your word spoken forth by the mouths of children, as we have joined together in the chorus of singing to you, we are amazed at your majesty. Help us to continue to worship you as we look at this Psalm, as we put our minds and our hearts directed toward you and to be shaped by your word that we would be a people who are marked and known for our praise of you. We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.

The times I have had the opportunity to listen to a full orchestra play, I have always loved the very beginning. Actually, the beginning before the beginning. I enjoy the pomp of the evening. I enjoy that the musicians are probably wearing black tie or formal attire. Perhaps the audience members are also dressed up nicely. The enjoyment of the architecture, the vastness of the hall, the beauty of its design, its acoustic purposes, the staircases, the woodwork, the tapestries, the carpets, the colors, all of this being put forward to the anticipation when you sit down to listen to a performance. The musicians take their seats and then independently of each other, they adjust their music stands. They get situated with their clothing and their posture, and they're beginning to adjust their instrument.

And then my favorite part happens. Traditionally, the oboe plays a bright, crisp A note, and the other parts of the orchestra are beginning to play their sound and tuning their instrument to that note. And out of all of these different various pitches – and maybe the strings are scratchy, maybe the woodwinds are whistling, and the trumpets are blasting – all of a sudden, it all gels together. And they're not even playing a song, and yet the sound is beautiful. The collections of these sounds are attuned with one another.

The Psalms are like that. They are the songbook for the people of God. They were used and they continue to be used by the people of God both in corporate worship and also private worship. Whether you are

musically inclined or whether you're like me who is not musically inclined, it is a beautiful mystery of the wedding together of information found in words and the beauty that comes together with music. We can take that same line of text, and working together, it does beautiful things, extraordinary things. It incorporates a cadence and a rhythm. Putting thoughts and information to music has been known to help and enhance memorization. Our brains, our bodies respond and, therefore, impact our very moods. The same lyric can come across happy and light or it can become melancholy and darker by the slightest change of chords, by the slightest change of scales.

And the Psalms are like this for the people of God. They are the very inspired word of God in the forms of poems and prayers put to music to transform us from the inside out. Their forms match the full range of the human experience, and the full range is to be incorporated into our worship, the very worship of the living God as we, His people, become more attuned in our minds and our hearts to who He is and the very closeness and nearness that we have with Him both as our creator and our redeemer.

So, with the time that we have this morning, I'm going to briefly talk about the Psalm of praise with some examples. We'll look briefly at the structure of Psalm 148 and then briefly discuss how we appropriate, how we make use of Psalms of praise in our lives. And so, we really begin seeing that a Psalm of praise, as with any Psalm for that matter, the way of praise is for all of creation to join together.

First, let's look at some common features of a Psalm of praise. Here in Psalm 148 and others like it, they're called hymns. Now, we might be used to the word "hymns" as just referring to songs in a religious context, like church for instance. But the word itself comes from the Latin through the Greek meaning a "song of praise or celebration." And whereas most of the Psalms are Psalms of lament, the overall tone of the Psalms taken together is one of praise.

For example, the final Psalms that we have from Psalm 146 to 150, there are no complaints, there are no laments, there are no petitions, there are no cries. Rather, they are nothing but celebratory praise directed to the Lord God. It is truly fitting that in the Hebrew, the book of Psalms is translated as "praises to our God." And such praise highlights the energy and the excitement one has for the Lord. And they often include contagious invitations for others to join in which is one of the reasons why we corporately have our call to worship from the Psalms, being invited into the space together worshiping God, declaring true things about who He is and what He has done, worshiping Him with all praise. Psalm 100, for example, says, "Shout for joy to the Lord all the earth, serve the Lord with gladness. Come before him with joyful songs; know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture."

Sometimes, these praises are offered by an individual. For example, we see in Psalm 8 David giving a Psalm of praise when he says, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him? And the son of man that you care for him?" There are individual Psalms of praise, and there's also Psalms of praise offered as a community. For example, Psalm 115 begins with, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be all the glory." And it likewise ends with, "But we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore. Praise the Lord!"

The reasons for such praise are significantly tied to the Lord's character. Psalm 103:8, "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." They are tied to His works of creation such as what we see in Psalm 148 here, verses 5 and 6, and likewise, His works of redemption such as Psalm 66. Now, these praises can be vague in their details or they can be specific moments in the history of Israel in the life of one of her members of the covenant. The occasion for an individual Psalm's praise may place it in various types of Psalms and even sub genres of Psalms.

When we think about praise, we can say the words, "Praise the Lord," as verse 1 shows and as verse 14 ends by actually declaring praise. We sang it in one of the songs, "Hallelujah! Praise to the Lord," giving praise to the one who makes Himself known, the one who is present, the one who is both the creator and redeemer of His people, the great deliverer on high who makes Himself known and draws near. He is worthy of praise. Other places in Psalms might use synonyms such as "exalt," "extol," "exalt." Yes, those are three different words. "Laud and magnify," "celebrate and bless," and "resound and glorify." All of these are verbs of

elevation that we are directing something that's on our lips but is something that is welling up from our very souls and spilling out and directing it to the God who knows us and the God who is with us.

Generally speaking, Psalms of praise contain the following three elements. We see it in Psalm 148 as an example, but we see there is a call to praise God. We see the reasons why we should be offering praises to Him. And then it ends with another call to praise Him. And we see these features in Psalm 148.

So, just briefly look with me at Psalm 148 as the structure guides us to see how all of creation joins together to worship the Lord. As I've mentioned, verse 1 begins and verse 14 ends, "Praise the Lord," as does Psalms 146 through 150. These Psalms have no complaints, no cries, no petitions, just raw praise. The word for praise here, "hallelu," emphasizes the object as it's directed to Yahweh, the Lord, the God of Israel who makes Himself known. The Psalmist is summoning the congregation together to praise not just deity, not just virtue, not just strength, not just transcendence of some kind of ethereal goo in the universe that's somehow present or guiding and holding things together, but specifically, the living God. And the congregation's praise is intended for a specific God who revealed Himself to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, to Moses, to David, and on and on throughout the generations.

When looking at the Psalms, it is helpful to look at the overall structure. Look for repeating words. What themes do you see? What tones do you sense from the psalmist? Are the verses in parallel with each other? Does that help understand the concepts that might be put forth in the Psalm? Metaphors and other imagery communicate both the meaning but also the tone that the Psalm writer wishes to convey.

And here in 148, we see that the word "praise" is even mentioned 13 times. The Lord's name is mentioned six times as well as another dozen or so of the pronouns directing our attention and our focus on Him. And we see this structure flows from the heavens to the earth and the peoples. Verses 1 through 6, all the heavens praise the Lord. We see the heights above and the expanses that are well beyond our neck of the woods, so to speak, in the universe. The whole cosmos is created by the word of God's power. And by that very word, all things through Christ are being held together, and it is worshiping and praising God. From the heavens and the heights to the created celestial beings, the angels. The word "hosts" sometimes means "armies," but here in parallel, it's just referencing all of these heavenly bodies. It goes on to give examples of the sun and the moon, that which brings light, the skies above and then even the rain clouds. All of these things together praise the name of the Lord for He commanded, and they were created. He established them and they shall not pass away. Let all the heavens praise the name of the Lord.

The second thing you notice in the structure is that all the earth praises the Lord, verses 7 through 10 praise the Lord from the earth. And he mentions the depths. He goes all the way to the deceased. John Calvin, even, he translated the sea creatures "whales." Just imagine all the beauty and the splendor and the mystery and the majesty of what we know now. And even then, it's not very much of the oceans. But the depths all bring forth their song of praise. Things of the sky, fire and hail, snow and mist, even the winds fulfilling His word. The forming and the filling of God's creation is a self-reflection of His glory, His magnificence. And it all sings to Him. Let the earth praise the Lord.

And third in the structure, we see how all the peoples praise the Lord. And again, it follows this rhythm of the heights and the depths, the grandeur and the simplicity. We see the kings of the earth, the princes and the rulers, and all other peoples, both men and women, both the old and children, let them praise the name of the Lord as we heard so beautifully this morning. May we all with our lips and our lives bring forth praise to the Lord. And we see the reason here in verse 14, "He has raised up a horn for His people." Now, a horn in the Old Testament is a symbol of strength, of power, even of beauty and majesty. The horns on the Ark of the Covenant, the horn used for anointing the rulers, the horn of strength and splendor, and how this Lord who makes Himself known raises up one for His people and for His saints to praise Him who is near. Let all the peoples praise Him.

So, how do we make use of Psalms of praise in our lives? Briefly, just two things. We make use of the Psalms of praise by how it involves our understanding with its meaning. Our cognitive faculties are enhanced by the metaphors and the imagery of how these things seek to describe the Lord's character, how these things describe the Lord's deeds, His actions, His redemption. When interpreting individual Psalms, we can ask several questions. We've already started to address some of them. You look at the structure. What does the

structure have to say to communicate the meaning and the purpose and the intent of the psalmist? As poetry, the content is presented in a way for the reader, the singer, and the chanter to interact with these themes. We observe repetitions, we observe the imagery, we observe the wordplay and how these things shed light on the significance for our lives. As we understand more of who God is, it cultivates our love for Him. As we understand His beauty and majesty, we are ushered into praise for who He is.

Secondly, we can ask the question, what kind of Psalm is this? We've done that with this one as a particular Psalm of praise. Different scholars have different lists of categories such as different genres and subgenres. And as already mentioned, we'll be looking at several of these throughout the summer. Another important question with interpreting the Psalms is what context of the Psalm presuppose? What I mean by that is where does it fit into the story of God's redemption? Is it a song of Moses in the context of the covenant of Sinai, the giving of the law? Is it a Psalm of David that's in the context of the covenant made with him as the anointed king, the messiah that would have a ruler on the throne for generations to come which is ultimately fulfilled in Christ? Where do we see God working both in Israel's story and then the people of God as we've been in-grafted into this covenant that was made to Abraham and fulfilled in the bringing in of both Jew and Gentile.

Sometimes, the Psalm actually has a title. You might look in your English Bibles and maybe it's in italics. In the original, that's actually verse zero. That's in the Psalm. It could be an actual title; it could be background information for a particular historical context. It could be a liturgical term. We don't always know what they mean, but it references melodies or types of instrumentation that they would've known at the time. All of these things taken together help shape our understanding.

We also make use of Psalms of praise by putting into practice. This becomes a key part both of corporate, public worship but also individual and personal worship. How does the singing of a Psalm shape the hearts of God's people? Sometimes we don't feel it, do we? Sometimes we come to worship and it's just not clicking. We're not engaged. We make use of the Psalms because we are saying we believe God is true. We believe God is worthy of praise, and God, I don't feel it right now, but I want to declare your praise. Sometimes we feel it, and all the more it gels and jives together with our heart and our lips. But we do it corporately for the people of God to be shaped by the very words God gives us to declare praise to Him. And by doing so, we are practicing the very emotions that He wants His people to have.

Now, individually and personally, we do this in the morning. We can do this in mid-day, we can do this at night. Colossians speaks of this, of singing Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to one another, that the word of Christ dwell richly in us. We do this in our personal worship. You may, in your own practices, go through the Psalms every day. It's a practice that I try to do where I go through all 150 Psalms in a given month. I don't hit them all. I'm noticing I don't get to the evenings as much. So, you skip some. But you keep going, and you seek to be in the presence of the living God and to be shaped by Him.

The encouragement that we have from this particular Psalm is that the Lord is glorified at all times by His very creation. Think about time zones. Think about these celestial bodies that are mentioned, the laws of physics that God has put into place. He doesn't need you and me to worship Him. He is going to be worshiped with us or without us. But He invites us into that space where we, both with the angels and the whales, are giving praise to the living God. This is encouraging because when we experience no desire or ability to muster praise on our lips, or when circumstances are crashing in around us, or when the world appears to be burning and falling apart, the heavenly heights and the earthly depths give praise to the Lord. He's being praised 24/7, 365.

And the invitation and what becomes our prayer is that the very creatures that are lesser than the heavenly beings but crowned with the very glory of God and the honor that He has bestowed upon us as male and female made in His image, we get to join together with the resounding chorus to sing our praises of the one who made us and the one who redeemed us through Jesus Christ. With our lips and our lives, let us function and flourish as we join together in such marvelous praise.

And just like the orchestra with that oboe starting the tuning process, praise becomes that frequency that we live on. I'm not musical, like I said, so I was on the Internet. The reason why the oboe and maybe the

clarinet has been used is because string instruments were often made out of guts, cat guts for instance. And it wasn't always consistent, and humidity might have impacted the strings. But here was an instrument that could be a consistent note, that everything could focus upon and adjust and attune toward. And the Psalms and the people of God are this orchestra that are attuning our minds and our hearts to worship the one who is worthy. There are registers that are higher; there are registers that are lower. And in any given moment of our day, any given moment of our lifetime, we're going to experience them all.

It gives flavor to what it means when also we are to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. It's not because I'm necessarily mourning in my life, but as the people of God, we share in it together both in our rejoicing and both in our mourning. And we do both through the lens of our praise to the one who is worthy above all.

So, we see so many reasons to worship and to praise God. The Psalms are full of them. The Scriptures are full of them, to praise God for His character, to praise God for His creative power and His redemptive work. It's a call to praise Him. We see the reasons for it, and we end again with praise. These poems, these prayers, it's how God uses a songbook, a hymnal, to shape His people, to think, to dwell, to love, to be formed by His very presence, the very things He wants us to be shaped by. And as His people, we sing beautiful melodies of His goodness and grace as we reflect His image. When our hearts and our minds are attuned to praise the Lord, we can play the heights of jubilations and the depths of our despair as we hold fast to the one who is worthy, the one worthy of all our praise.

And so, what we're going to do before we sing this last song is that I'm going to invite you to stand. Projectionist, would you please put 148 back up on the screen? And I'll invite the musicians to come up. I want us to say in unison this Psalm. For some of you, you are going to be perfectly attuned and praising God. For some of you, God feels like He doesn't even exist. For some of you, He may feel like He's not even shining anything on you; He's hidden from you. Maybe you want to run from Him. I invite you to praise God regardless and listen to one another as we're witnesses of the one true living God who makes Himself known. And ultimately, the beauty of that is found in, as Colossians says, "The image of God was pleased to dwell bodily in Jesus Christ." Look to Him and find refuge. Let's praise God with this Psalm.

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights!
Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts! Praise him, sun and moon,
praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters
above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the LORD! For he commanded
and they were created. And he established them forever and ever; he gave a
decree, and it shall not pass away.

Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all deeps, fire and
hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word! Mountains and all hills, fruit
trees and all cedars! Beasts and all livestock, creeping things and flying birds!
Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men
and maidens together, old men and children!

Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his majesty
is above earth and heaven. He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his
saints, for the people of Israel who are near to him. Praise the LORD!

Let us pray. Lord, hear our prayers. Hear our praises to you, for you are worthy. Shape us, mold us, make us people who make our lives and our lips together congruent, interwoven, that we would by our very lives be a reflection of your glory back to you, but also to one another. Help us to praise you with our words and with our lives. In Jesus's name. Amen.