

Praise the Judge

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[0 : 0 0] Well, let me welcome us all to this Lunchtime Bible Talk. It's good to see you, and a particular welcome if this is your first time. We are continuing, almost getting to the end now, of our little series on the Hallel, the Praise Psalms at the end of the Psalter. And we've come today to Psalm 149, which you'll find on page 526. So let's read the psalm together.

Psalm 149. Praise the Lord. Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the godly.

Let Israel be glad in his maker. Let the children of Zion rejoice in their king. Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre, for the Lord takes pleasure in his people. He adorns the humble with salvation. Let the godly exult in glory. Let them sing for joy on their beds. Let high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, to execute vengeance on the nations and punishments on the peoples, to bind their kings with chains and their nobles with fetters of iron, to execute on them the judgment written. This is the honor for all his godly ones. Praise the Lord. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Let's have a moment of prayer together. Lord God, we pray indeed that day by day, as we experience your new mercies and your new faithfulness, that we may indeed sing to you new songs of praise, praise for your age-old covenant, and yet that covenant which is fresh and new every morning. And as we look at these psalms together, as we listen to and try to sing along with these ancient psalmists, with their words spoken in a particular time and place, and yet totally relevant to us all, we pray indeed that our hearts will be enlarged, that our minds will be stirred, and that we may indeed praise you, praise your wonderful name, and glorify you in all that we do. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Amen. One of the most inspirational types of reading is reading church history, reading about inspirational people who have carried the work of the Lord forward, people like Luther, the Wesleys, put your own names in, who your own favorites are, and times of great blessing and times of revival. It's also good to read about how the church, Christian missionaries and others have been at the forefront of improving society, building schools and hospitals, and getting rid of abuses of all kinds. And of course, it's very sad that now that whole Christian heritage is gradually being undone and scorned by so many of the people. But there's a darker side to church history. There is the very often what's sometimes been called holy war, which often began with very good intentions, but then went badly wrong. For example, the crusades, which were really an attempt to free the holy places, the places associated with Jesus' life and birth and death, but very often simply became massacre and bloodshed and power politics among the warring nations. And similarly, many of the religious wars, many of them showing horrific bloodshed on both sides. And it's a dark, it's not a chapter, there are many chapters in church history which are dark like that. And the second part of this psalm, verses 6 to 9, has often been pressed into service for these kind of activities. Now, we'll come back to that in a moment or two, but one thing we've got to remember is that ancient Israel was a political state as well as the people of God. And as a political state, as a nation among nations, it often had to fight for its survival. And we cannot just simply take that and apply it in the raw to God's people. God's people are now not a political state. They are scattered among the nations. So we can't simply take these passages and say, this gives us the right to behave in this way. Ancient Israel had to fight. One of their greatest figures, King David, was essentially a warrior king who rescued them from their enemies and fulfilled the promise that the land would stretch from the Nile to the Euphrates. And it is true, we'll come to this as well, that on the last day, God's enemies will be destroyed. But we must not take verses like this and use them to justify violence in today. By the way, I'm not a pacifist. I'm not advocating pacifism. I'm simply saying that we cannot take passages like this and apply them in the raw. We're not a political state. We are God's people, as I say, scattered among the nations. And when the Lord finally redeems his people, his enemies will be destroyed.

Finally, on the last day. And it seems to me this psalm continues really the last verse of Psalm 148. He has raised up a horn, horn signifying strength and victory. And once again, it's praising the Creator and the Savior. Now, Psalm 148 particularly emphasized the Creator. It's not absent here. Let them, verse 2, let Israel be glad in his Maker. But the emphasis is on God in history. God, the Savior, and the Judge. And there's no contradiction between these. The Thomas Cranmer, the great reformer, in his prayer book, in the burial service, has this phrase, most merciful Savior, Judge Eternal. They belong together. It's not Savior and, oh, by the way, he's also Judge. It's most merciful Savior who is also Judge Eternal.

[6 : 46] So let's look at the psalm in its two parts. First of all, praising his name, verses 1 to 5, and then judging his enemies, verses 6 to 9. Derek Kidner, in his final commentary, calls these parts the church jubilant and the church militant. Wish I'd thought these up before. I wish I'd thought up these headings for Kidner did, but I didn't. So I'm giving you my less exciting headings.

By the way, Derek Kidner's commentary on the Psalms is one of the very best, his little two-volume commentary. Because among other things, apart from his biblical scholarship, his rare spiritual insight, kidner is a musician, and helps you very often to understand the musical aspects of the sound. Anyway, praising his name, the now familiar call to praise, once again here is his communal praise, his praise in the assembly of the godly. The godly are the holy ones, later the hasidim, as the word is, later applied to a sect in Judaism. But here, as in the book of Daniel, equivalent basically to all who love him, the children of Zion, off verse 2. The assembly of the godly, all God's people, as they sing God's praises, and as they sing a new song, probably a song for a new victory. And throughout the Psalter, if you read the earlier parts, you'll find very often David is singing after particular victories, or after particular experiences of rescue. At the great 18th Psalm, for example,

David sang this song to the Lord on the day the Lord rescued him from all his enemies, and from his great enemy, Saul himself. All who love the Lord. And once again, we are given the reasons for praise. He made us, and he is our king who cares for us, and will one day receive us into his eternal kingdom. Now, once again, this is not superficial. This is not whistling in the wind.

When we say the Lord is king, what that means is he will have the last word. His kingdom will never end. Earthly kingdoms, earthly states, earthly regimes, all sooner or later come to an end.

Very often, it seems, in even democracies, that a certain party is going to be in power forever, but it's never that way. Sooner or later, there is a change in events, and sooner or later, different people are in power. This will not happen with the kingdom of God. His kingdom will last forever, and it will never be defeated. Now, verse 3 is not, and we'll see this again next week, particularly in the orchestra, Psalm 150. This is not a prescription of how to praise him.

[9 : 48] To praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre. Well, many of us here, I have no doubt, are probably Presbyterians and find it difficult to imagine praising the Lord with dancing. Remember, David did this. David danced before the Lord, but then he was an exuberant oriental. It's not a recipe for how we are to praise. Rather, it's a call to worship him exuberantly, and not, as we'll see next week particularly, that does not mean this is the only way to worship. There is lament. There is protest. I'll say a bit more about that next week when we come to the last psalm. And these are still worship. A psalm like Psalm 88, for example, which is the gloomiest psalm in the Psalter, ending in darkness, nevertheless is addressed to the God of my salvation. Psalm is realizing that deeper in his gloom, deeper in the pit in which he is trapped, there is the goodness of God, the salvation of God. And I suppose the tambourine and lyre particularly recall Exodus 15, as Miriam, Moses' sister, after the crossing of the Red Sea, praised the Lord with tambourine and lyre. And we'll see this next week as well. I don't think these instruments are just simply random choices. They're recalling these great moments. And verse four is something even more, for the Lord takes pleasure in his people. This is amazing, is it not? Not just his mighty acts of creation and salvation, but taking pleasure in his people, in all their weakness, in all their fallenness. And verse five, I suppose, is sleeping without fear.

It doesn't necessarily mean that you break out into the hallelujah chorus in the middle of the night and disturb your spouse. Sure, that's not what it means. What it means, I think, is first of all, you go to sleep without fear. I will lie, I will lie down and sleep without fear. And also, it may suggest the reclining on couches. It may not just be sleeping, as for example, the Passover feast, where people reclined on couches, and where they sang some of those psalms. So it may refer to that as well.

Because again, praise is a lifestyle, not just words and music. That's why we have some psalms, for example, that are morning psalms and others which are evening psalms. It's the whole of the day is included in praise. So praising his name, and this comes right down, as I say, even to everyday activities, every night activities such as sleeping. Now let's come then to judging his enemies, a seemingly abrupt change in verses six to nine. I mean, after all, look at verse six. Six a, let the high praises of God be in their throats, and two-edged swords in their hands. Well, that strikes a very jarring note, does it not? But remember, first of all, what I said about Israel being a political state. When David killed Goliath, there was rejoicing, because Goliath was God's enemies, who had taunted God and his people, and so on. And we're looking forward also to the fuller meaning. But what is the two-edged sword? The sword is the word of God itself, which creates and saves. And the author of Hebrews picks up this in his letter, chapter four, the word of God is sharper than a two-edged sword, and divides joints and marrow, and penetrates right into our innermost thoughts, our innermost feelings, our innermost personality, the word of God. So the sword is the word of God, the sword of the spirit, which, as Paul says in Ephesians 6, is the word of God. And praise opens our eyes to the reality.

When we hear, when the word penetrates, it's often uncomfortable, isn't it? There are parts of the word we would rather not hear, parts of the word we would rather not obey, parts of the word we should prefer were not there, perhaps. But it is sharp. And on the last day, this will happen to the unrepentant. Read Revelation 19. The rider on the white horse rise out of heaven with the armies of heaven following him, and out of his mouth goes a sharp two-edged sword, which destroys his enemies.

Those who will not come to him in repentance and faith, those who will not praise his name, will be destroyed by that word that they have despised. And in the end, called this little series, you may remember, praise in the end. Universal praise can only happen if the world is judged.

[15:04] Psalm 98, probably referred to already in some of the earlier sessions. The mountains rejoicing, the rivers clapping their hands, all of creation and exuberance before the Lord, for he comes.

What does he come for? He comes to judge the earth. And we know that needs to happen. When we look around at the world and look at the Islamic State, look at the horrific crimes that happen, and for that matter, look into our own hearts, we realize there has to be a judgment. And the continual message of the gospel is judgment now to save us from judgment then. Listening to the word now, when it penetrates, when we don't like it, when it calls us to repentance and faith, repenting now.

But is there another application of these words? To bind their kings with chains and their nobles with fetters of iron. Now, Paul, in 2 Corinthians 10, using the military metaphor about pulling down strongholds, speaks of taking every thought captive to Christ. And that is certainly a legitimate application of these words. Paul speaks about wrestling, fighting with the spiritual wickednesses in the heavenly places. And basically, what's being said is, the word will judge us. The word judges us.

It can judge us now, or it can judge us then. Now, I know that this is something that has to happen every day. There's the initial judgment when we come to Christ, when we repent of our sins, when we start living the Christian life and following him. But then there is also the judgment that comes every day.

The judgment, that's why we need to confess our sins every day. There will never be a moment in this life when we don't need to confess our sins. Apostle John says, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. And the way to avoid deceiving ourselves is by allowing the truth to be in us. In other words, by listening to this word which judges, this word which points out and shines into the dark places of our hearts. So there's the spiritual battle that goes on, the internal battle and the external battle. Now, there are many of our brothers and sisters in other countries who suffer of savage persecution. And it must be horrific for them. And we pray for them regularly, of course.

[18:06] And those of you who take the material from the Barnabas Trust will know many of these things that are happening. And what this psalmist is calling us to do is, in the battle, to keep on singing, when the strife is fierce, the warfare long, steals on our ear the distant triumph song.

The hearts are glad again and faith is strong. You see, in the end, the enemies will be defeated. In the end, Satan, death, and hell will be defeated. So you see how the two parts of the psalm belong together. The first part of the psalm is saying things like, exult, rejoice on your beds. Rejoice because of the greatness, the wonder, the glory of the king who is the creator. The second part is saying we are involved in a battle, a spiritual battle, but also pointing forward to the day, when praise will fill the universe. All will be praise because the enemies of God have been defeated. And that seems to me to be the message of this psalm. And why these two parts, which seem so contradictory, and so, and indeed the second part seeming so unpleasant, are making the same message clear. The word of God is a sharp two-edged sword. It pierces, it penetrates, it divides, whether individuals or communities. And we need to be like the blessed man of Sam 1, who walks in the way of the Lord and does not turn aside to the way of sinners. Amen. Let's pray.

Lord God, we recognize that there are many times when we find it very difficult to praise. Many times when we feel that life is just too hard, too difficult, the battle is too long, and the struggle seems to be not availing. Help us to look beyond that, to the battle that has already been won for us by the Lord Jesus Christ, and whose results will be made clear on the day when every knee bows and every tongue confesses. We ask that in his name. Amen.