

Lifelong Praise

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[0 : 00] Well, let me welcome everyone as we meet for this Lunchtime Bible Talk. If this is your first time, a particular welcome, but a welcome to everybody, whether you're a regular or an occasional visitor.

Now, over the next weeks, we are going to be looking at five of the Psalms, the last five Psalms, in fact, Psalms 147 to 150. I've called this Praise in the End, and that means a couple of things, at least a couple of things.

First of all, the Psalter ends in praise of the various notes that have been played right throughout the book from the beginning. The last five are Praise Psalms, the Hallel Psalms, as they are called. Hallel means praise, and of course, Hallelujah is praise the Lord, and each of the Psalms begins with praise the Lord and ends with praise the Lord. Indeed, the whole section does, from verse 1 of Psalm 147 to verse 6, I think it is, of Psalm 150.

But there's also another shade of meaning. Praise in the End means that when the kingdom comes, when God sets up his kingdom, it will all be praise. The whole universe will be filled with praise without discordant notes.

[1 : 17] So that's what we're going to be looking at as we look at these five Psalms. And we'll begin by reading Psalm 147, which you'll find on page 525 in the Bibles.

Psalm 146. I think I said 147. Well, I didn't mean 146. I've never been any good at arithmetic, at counting, but let me see.

Oh, we've got it right on the sheet. Anyway, Psalm 146. Ignore the ESV heading.

Some people think they're part of the inspired text. They're not. Psalm 146, verse 1. Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, O my soul.

I will praise the Lord as long as I live. I will sing praises to my God while I have my being. Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man in whom there is no salvation.

[2 : 20] When his breath departs, he returns to the earth. On that very day, his plans perish. Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever, who executes judgment for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free. The Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down. The Lord loves the righteous.

The Lord watches over the sojourners. Upholds the widow and fatherless. But the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. The Lord will reign forever.

Your God, O Zion, to all generations, praise the Lord. Amen. So let's pray together. Our Father, we sometimes find it hard and difficult to praise.

There is so much that is perplexing in the world and in our own lives. There are so many mysteries and so many problems. We thank you that one day it will be all praise.

[3 : 35] There will be praise in the end. And we thank you too that it is still possible to praise, even in this fallen world, and even with our sinful hearts and lives.

And so bless us as we look together at these psalms, as we listen to what the unknown psalmist or psalmist have to say. We pray that we will be richly blessed, and that indeed our lives, not just our lips, may show the excellences of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Amen. Praise sounds a very upbeat subject, doesn't it?

But there's a big problem, isn't there? We don't admire people who are continually asking to be praised. People who are full of themselves and whose favorite subject of conversation is themselves.

The kind of person who keeps on talking about their achievements and their families, and you stand with a fixed grin, trying to look interested. You know the definition of a bore, someone who talks about themselves when you want to talk about yourself.

[4 : 54] In other words, this is something which we all struggle with, isn't it? We very much place ourselves at the heart of our lives. And therefore, and this is one of the reasons we find it difficult to praise.

But the problem is this. If we don't admire humans who are continually soliciting praise, why do we admire God? Why do we worship him?

Why do we praise him when he is continually telling us, and the biblical writers and hymn writers, continually telling us to praise him? Now, I hope it will become clearer as we go through these sounds.

A brief answer at the moment. God asks us to praise him not because he needs it, but because we need it. We are most fully ourselves when we praise him, when we are taken out of our own selfish concerns, and when we're taken out of our own little narrow world and are able to praise him.

Now, that does not mean God doesn't care for us, and we'll see this as we go through. But it does mean that God wants us to put ourselves and all our problems and all we do and all we are in the context of who he is, our spiritual health.

[6 : 12] And praise is not just about what we say, what we sing. It's about how we live, a whole lifestyle, if you like. And these last five psalms flow naturally from the last psalms of David in the Psalter.

Psalms 138 to 145 are the last psalms of David. And these psalms of David, once again, are dominated by praise, the confidence that all will be well.

Not that the problems are ignored, and particularly in the last talk, when we come to Psalm 150, I want to say a bit more about that. But it's a final playing of many of the themes of the book, just like at the end of a play when the characters come and bow out of the stage.

So the various themes, the various topics of the Psalter come together in these five. And so in this one, Psalm 146, I've called it lifelong praise.

I think it would probably be better to have called it praise to all eternity. I continually find this. I announce beforehand, in order that the secretaries will be able to have the material, what my title is going to be.

[7 : 25] And usually I change my mind about it between sending the title. But anyway, lifelong praise, certainly. But even more so, when you look at verse 10, the Lord will reign forever.

Praise into all eternity. Now, the psalm falls into three parts. And first of all, verses 1 to 2, we have a call to praise. Now, it's a collective call.

Praise the Lord there is plural. It's calling all God's people to praise him. But also, while it's plural, each individual brings their own particular praise.

Praise the Lord, O my soul. Now, the soul in the Old Testament is not some disembodied entity inside our body. The soul is the whole of us.

Praise the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord with everything I am and everything I have. That would be another way of putting it. Each individual brings their particular praise.

[8 : 24] We all have our own blessings to give thanks for. We all have our own problems. We all have our own situations. Which we bring to God.

And it becomes part of that chorus of praise. But notice, it's not just the mood of the moment. I will praise the Lord as long as I live. Notice what the psalmist is saying.

He's not saying it's always going to be easy. There will be dark moments. There will be tough moments. It will be very, very, very hard to praise. And so he's saying, even in dark days, I'm going to praise him.

There's a very interesting article entitled, What do Miserable Christians Sing? Written by Carol Truman, who teaches in Philadelphia, in America, and also pastors a church.

And in that, he's arguing it's very important to use the psalms. He's not arguing we should only sing the psalms, of course. But he's saying in the psalms, there are laments and protests which help us as well.

[9 : 30] Well, and the Bible talks about the sacrifice of praise. Well, it's easy to praise when we're happy, isn't it? Days when life is going well, good things are happening, good things are in prospect.

There are those bleak days, tragedy strikes in our lives. What else? We have simply a feeling of grayness and depression. The psalmist says, I will sing praise to the Lord as long as I live.

How do we do that? It's not enough to say what the old gospel hymn says. You ask me how I know he lives. He lives within my heart. That's not really good enough, is it?

That's fine when my heart is rejoicing. But what about the times when another Easter hymn puts it, when my heart is grieving, wintry, and in pain? I need to know not just that he lives within my heart, that he lives and reigns in heaven and earth, irrespective of what I'm feeling at any given moment. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again, even when I don't feel any of that is real.

That's why we need God's words to help us.

[10:43] So it's not just the mood of the moment. And also, it's not just what we do when we sing. As I said, being, I will praise the Lord while I have my being.

It's part of our lifestyle. Now, in this altar, there are many psalms for different occasions, like, for example, Psalm 88, the bleakest and darkest of all the psalms, but it still speaks of the God of my salvation.

Even in the blackness, he's holding on to that. Sing obviously means music, but it's also heart and attitude. And praising is part of healthy living.

I notice, said C.S. Lewis, the most balanced and broad minds praise most, while the cranks and misfits praise least. The whingers, the complainers.

And we all whinge and complain, don't we? But I think Lewis is right. The most balanced and broad minds praise most. Well, first of all, then, the call to praise, verses 1 and 2.

[11:52] And then, really, the rest of the psalm talks, first of all, about a wrong way to praise and then a right way to praise. The wrong praise in verses 3 and 4. Now, this seems an abrupt change of mood, doesn't it?

Praise the Lord. Put not your trust in princes. But, in fact, it's totally related. What the psalmist is saying is, don't praise the wrong people in the wrong way.

Because praise has trust at its heart, doesn't it? When we praise the Lord, we praise him because he is totally faithful, totally reliable. Don't put princes.

Now, we tend not to praise princes. Read for that. The influential, the celebrities, the big names. Don't give to them the praise which belongs to God alone.

Don't build your lives on them. And, you see, he's not saying don't praise people. As I said a minute ago, of course, I mean, we ought to praise more than we do. Because it's a great antidote to complaining.

[12:54] But don't place our faith for time and eternity in them. As I say, don't praise politicians. Very few people do nowadays. I think we're probably too cynical, after all.

Because it's often been said, we get the leaders we deserve. And there you go. So, when you vote tomorrow, and I hope you will vote tomorrow, think and pray carefully.

Because the whole point is, when you're thinking about who to vote for, there is no, at least there's no one in any party I know, who you could vote for on every aspect of their policy.

And, you see, doing that would be putting our faith in princes. If I vote for this party, the world will be transformed. If I vote for this individual, everything will go right.

Now, we get the leaders we deserve. And there is no salvation in human beings. You see, in a son of man, when his breath departs, and who was the son of man?

[14:01] Adam. Adam, who died, came under a death sentence. Adam returns to the earth. And he returns to the earth. Adam returns to the Adamah.

The earthling, if you like, returns to the earth. If that doesn't sound too much like science fiction. But the point is that we cannot trust any human being in this way, because they can only help in their own mortal lives.

The moment the breath departs, they return to the earth. On the very day, their plans perish. What the psalmist is saying is, it's not a digression.

It's not irrelevant. Don't put into human beings the kind of trust you give to God. He's not saying be cynical, distrustful of everybody and everything, and suspicious.

He's saying, remember, there is only one who can carry you through this life and beyond. And that's the third part of this psalm. The right kind of praise.

[15:01] Verses 5 to 10. Blessed is he. Now, blessed is not just happy. It can mean happy. But blessed ultimately means there is a destiny of salvation ahead, whether we feel like it or not.

The opposite is woe. Woe means coming under the judgment of God. Blessed means being under the salvation of God. And there are various notes played here, which I see are played throughout the Psalter, and now for the final songs.

Why do we praise God? First of all, because he transforms us. He is the God of Jacob. Now, Jacob, Israel, this parallel runs right through the Old Testament, right from the beginning when the brothers were born, Jacob and Esau.

And Jacob was a very unsatisfactory character. Don't put your trust in Jacob. I mean, of course you don't put your trust in Jacob, because Jacob was a cheat after all, wasn't he?

He was the kind of man whom you would be very, very rash to trust. And yet, God transforms Jacob into Israel. Just as he takes us, the unpromising material, the Jacob in us, and turns it into Israel.

[16:17] And he is the Lord, the God of the covenant, the God who is committed to his people by promises that he cannot and will not break.

So, right throughout the Bible, right throughout the Psalter, this note has been struck. Why do we trust him? Because he transforms us. He takes the raw material, and often the metaphor used, the picture is the potter, taking some shapeless lump of clay or some other substance and transforming it into something beautiful, which he will one day.

He is also the creator. In contrast to those who live and die, he is the, he's not a human godlet of pagan imagination.

The world in which Israel lived was full of gods, but they were confined to places and to situations. You had the God of the sea, for example, the God of the mountaintops, the God of the pasture lands, the God of the trees and so on, the God of the valleys and the plains.

You had the good gods, the gods who looked after love and care. You had the evil gods, gods of plague and pestilence. But they were human imagination.

[17:36] You see, the God of Israel, our God, is not a sea god. He is the God who made the sea. He's not the God of the mountains. He is the God who made the mountains.

He is the God who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them. Different parts of the globe, if you like. They all belong to him. Now, because of that, there is no part of creation which can stop him carrying out his purposes.

There is no part of creation where we can escape from him. David has said that back in Psalm 130. Where can I flee from your spirit?

I go up to heaven. I go down to Sheol, the underworld. If I take the wings of the morning to the uttermost parts of the sea, even there, your hand will lead me.

Wonderful phrase, the wings of the morning to the uttermost parts of the sea. A friend of mine said that gave him great comfort once when he was a long-distance flight to Australia. It's just as the dawn was rising, the sense that this God whom I knew back in Britain is still here and he still cares.

[18:46] And he keeps faith forever. There's no, and it means there are no circumstances beyond his control. That's why Paul is going to say in Romans 8, nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

You see, the pagan gods, if you're caught in a storm on the sea, there's not much point praying to the God of the sky, is there? In the book of Jonah, after all, Jonah prays in the storm to the God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything that's in them.

He's the God who transforms us. He's the creator. He's also the God who cares. Look at the next verses. He executes judgment for the, justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry.

Now we know, of course, about famine. We know, of course, about oppression. We'll come back to that in later talks. But this is the characteristic of God.

And in the earthly life of Jesus, this was exemplified. He sets the prisoners free. He opens the eyes of the blind. The prophet Isaiah uses, these are the words he uses, talk about the servant, servant of the Lord, who, of course, is the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

[20:07] And even here, there is the stern backdrop of judgment. At the end of verse 9, the way of the wicked he brings to ruin, echoing Psalm 1, the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked.

Those who choose ways other than God will end in judgment. He upholds the widow and the fatherless, the most vulnerable members of society, particularly in that day, that day without social security, that day without any structure.

Many people simply fell through the net and the Lord cares for them. He transforms us. He's the creator. He cares. But the final point that's made in verse 10, he is eternal.

The Lord will reign forever. Once again, echo going back to verse 4, when his breath departs, he returns to the earth.

On that very day, his plans perish. That will never happen with the Lord. He is not mortal. He is not passing. Now, notice, notice that what you get in this psalm, we'll see in other psalms.

[21 : 19] On the one hand, there's the vastness of God, the creator of the universe, the God who created thus the nebulae, the God who created the great galaxies, the God who created the mountains and the ocean.

He's also the God who cares for the widow and the fatherless. Now, we need both sides of God, don't we? If he's simply great and distant, then we can't have a relationship with him, can we?

On the other hand, if he is simply the one who cares, how do we know he's powerful enough to carry it out? Now, many people promise. They're not talking about insincere promises.

I'm talking about genuine promises. We often make promises and people make promises to us, but they can't carry them out. But with God, no one can ever use the phrase about the Lord, circumstances beyond his control.

That will never happen. So often happens in the human world. Oh, Zion, the people of God, one of the themes throughout the book. And the fact that he reigns and will never abdicate means, among other things, that he will have the last word.

[22 : 35] The last word will not be with the oppressors. The last word will not be with the wicked. The last word will be with the Lord.

And that last word in the end will be praise. Amen. Let's pray. Father, we praise you that you are the God who takes the Jacob in us and transforms it day by day into Israel.

You are the God who is our creator. You know every one of our days, how long or how short a time we have on this earth. You are the God who is just.

You are the God who is eternal. And so bless us now, Lord. May this strengthen us in the days to come. And may it give to us a true perspective perspective on the world around us.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.