

Join the Choir

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[0 : 0 0] Well, can I welcome us to this Lunchtime Bible Talk?

It's good to see you, whether you're a regular or an occasional visitor. And we're continuing with our studies in the last five of the Psalms, the Hallel Psalms, as they're called, Psalms of Praise, Psalms of Rejoicing.

And today we come to Psalm 148, which you'll find on page 526. And we'll begin by reading the psalm together. Remember, each of these Psalms begin and end with hallelujah, praise the Lord, and indeed the whole collection, beginning in 146 and ending in 150, begins and ends with these words.

So, Psalm 148, 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.

[1 : 2 6] 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, all 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. Amen, that is the word of the Lord. Let's have a moment of prayer now together. Praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord in the heights. Praise Him in His sanctuary. Praise Him for His mighty deeds. Praise Him according to His excellent greatness. Father, we often find it difficult to praise.

Often the notes that we sound are minor and discordant notes, but help us as we look at these words together again, these words which give us words to use when our hearts do not feel like praising and when the world looks like a place from which you have vanished.

[2 : 5 8] And yet, you give us these great truths, these great realities, which lead us to join with the choir of creation, saying, let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

Amen. And so we come to Psalm 148. I want to begin by asking you to consider two pictures. One is a peaceful summer day.

Children are playing happily beside a stream. Parents are relaxing. The landscape is beautiful. The trees are full of blossom. Birds are singing.

And there's an atmosphere of contentment, an atmosphere of happiness. The shrieks and laughter of the children mingling with the song of the birds. That's one picture.

Let me think of another picture. The sound and the stink of bombs. Children screaming. Parents dying. Buildings crashing in ruin.

[3 : 59] And a terrible sense of desolation and loss and hopelessness. Now, where do these two pictures belong?

You would think, immediately, they belong on different planets, wouldn't you? And yet we very well know that they both belong on the same planet, our planet, planet Earth.

You can find these scenes reproduced in different places and at different times. And another question, which one is the true picture? Which one is the reality?

The answer, surely, is both. Both are true. The summer scene with the children playing with the happiness and the joy. This is true of our world in a measure and points to the new creation.

But the other scene, the devastation, the violence, and the bombs, and the death, this is also true of our world because it is a fallen world.

[5 : 01] It's under the curse. Now, when we come to these last psalms, these psalms are encouraging us to praise God now in this fallen world, telling us that even in the fallen world, the truth of praise, the truth of creation, is a reality.

And yet we know that it's not going to be fully achieved until the kingdom comes. And here we are called to join the choir. The whole of creation, if you like, becomes a choir, just as in 150, the whole of creation becomes an orchestra.

Here we are asked to join the choir, which continually praises the Lord. In the book of Revelation, chapter 4, you have a picture of the throne of God surrounded by worshippers.

And among the worshippers are the four living creatures, creatures which represent the created order, the creatures which represent humanity and the animal life and so on.

And they are continually singing. They are continually praising God and the Lamb. And that, like all these pictures of the throne of God in the book of Revelation, is a glimpse of what's already happening.

[6 : 17] Already at this moment, before the throne of God, the living creatures, the angels, the blessed dead, praise the Lord. But it's also a picture of what will only fully happen in the new creation.

And Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher, in his commentary in the psalm, says this, commenting on this psalm, this exhortation to praise can never be out of place.

Speak where we may, and never out of time. Speak when we may. In other words, this is a call to praise the Lord at all times, in all places, in every circumstance.

And it clearly falls into two parts. Praise God from the heavens, verses 1 to 6. And praise God from the earth, verses 7 to 14.

Echoing, of course, the opening words of the Bible, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And now the heavens and the earth are called to praise him.

[7 : 21] So let's look, first of all, at praising from the heavens, verses 1 to 6. And as a progression here, we begin with those who are nearest to the throne.

Praise him, all his angels. Praise him, all his hosts. Very important reminder that angels are not to be worshipped. Angels have fared very badly, actually, in Christian thinking and Christian theology.

Sometimes they've been given far too great a place. Very obvious that the people to whom the letter to the Hebrews was written were giving angels far too big a place in their thinking.

They were placing angels on the level perhaps even higher than the Son of God, the Word himself. It's difficult to imagine a modern preacher or writer beginning saying, Jesus is great.

He's even greater than angels. A modern writer, a modern preacher, said that. You'd have to shrug and say, of course we know that. Because we tend to go to the opposite extreme, haven't we?

[8 : 27] We tend to ignore angels. We don't know where they fit in. We praise God the Father for his care. We thank him for the Spirit. We praise the Son. Well, where do angels fit in?

Now, Psalm 103 talks about angels being the mighty ones who do God's will. Praise him, you angels, you mighty ones who do his will through all his dominion.

They're not pretty little girls with wings. They are mighty, powerful, created beings whom God has made to carry out his will.

Long ago, Billy Graham wrote a book about angels called God's Secret Agents. That actually is a very good title because it does show in secret, unseen most of the time, angels carry out God's will.

But they are fellow worshippers. They worship along with us. In Job 38, verse 7, we are told that when God laid the foundations of the earth, the sons of God, the angels, shouted for joy.

[9 : 35] Praise him, all his hosts, once again, verse 2. Now, a title used about the Lord in the Old Testament often is the Lord of hosts. And the hosts are, first of all, the angel hosts, God's agents who carry out his will.

It also often refers to the starry host, the stars which spangle the night sky and which we know now to be so immensely distant from us and immensely bigger than our sun, which is a minor star after all.

And the stars are not arbiters of destiny. You know how in various times and still people read their horoscopes that stars are seen as guiding human destiny and as manipulating human destiny or not.

They are, they are simply created. And very occasionally, as well, the hosts can mean the hosts of Israel. In the David and Goliath story, for example, the hosts are there, the hosts, God's armies on earth.

You see, the angels sang at creation and of course they sang at the new creation, didn't they? In Luke chapter 2, a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and singing, glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill.

[10 : 54] And they sing on the last day. They rejoice over one sinner that repents and how much more will they rejoice when all God's people are gathered home.

Now, that makes it a very distant reality, but it is a reality. The angels are there to guard us and they are ministering spirits sent to help those who are heirs of salvation.

99% of the time, perhaps 100% of the time, we are not aware of their presence. But they are there. As in, for example, in 2 Kings chapter 6, Elisha the prophet is trapped in the Syrian town of Dothan and the armies of Syria surround the place and are coming with aggressive intent and Elisha's servant says, Master, what will we do?

And Elisha prays, Lord, open the young man's eyes and when the young man's eyes were opened, that host had dwindled to nothing because it was surrounded by the hosts of heaven, the armies of the living God.

we'd already met and earlier in that story had taken Elijah to heaven. So, these unseen myriads praise the Lord. And then, the angels lead the praise, if you like, and we are encouraged to join the angel choir.

[12 : 15] Angels, help us to adore him. You behold him face to face. And now we go to the inanimate creation, sun, moon, shining stars, the sun, the moon, and the stars.

Compare Psalm 19, the heavens declare the glory of God and the sky shows his handiwork and particularly there, the emphasis on the sun coming out from his tent.

Now, once again, how do they praise God? They praise God by shining, by being what God created them to be, by declaring his glory. where they are not themselves to be praised.

Israel was surrounded by nations who praised the sun, the moon, and the stars. Very often, the sun was a god, the moon was a goddess, and the stars are arbiters of destiny.

And many of the, and many of the bad kings of Israel and Judah, we are told, worship the starry host. They are not to be worshipped. Paul talks about worshipping the creator, the creator, sorry, the creation, rather than the creator.

[13 : 22] They are not to be praised. They are fellow singers in the choir, if you like. Praise him, you highest heavens. No region is too high.

No seraph is too bright. They all join in the praise. A medieval writer, Julian of Norwich, once had a vision in which she saw God holding in his hand a tiny hazelnut.

And she wondered what that hazelnut could be. It looked so small, so fragile. And she said, Lord, what is that nut? And he replied, that is everything that is.

The vastness of the creator compared to the creation like a nut in the hands of a human being. Praise him, you waters above the heavens, the rain clouds.

A poetic phrase for the rain clouds. In the flood story, the waters above the heavens came down and joined the waters that were rising from earth.

[14 : 27] Used by judgment. Sorry, used by God for judgment. Then in Malachi, the end of the Old Testament, Malachi prays, the Lord will open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing.

So, they are in their proper place. They fulfill God's will and by doing so, they sing his praise.

He let them praise the name of the Lord for he commanded and they were created. Notice, not just created in the past and left to get on with it, but creation that is established them forever and ever.

there will be a new heaven and a new earth. We'll not have the curse, but there will be also a radical continuity.

Not just human beings, but a cleansed and renewed universe. This is pointing to that. Eternally, they speak. Psalm 119, sorry, Psalm 19 once again says they speak, although they've no voice.

[15 : 35] As we look up at the starry heavens, as we look at the sun, as we look at the moonshine, then they speak. So praise God from the heavens. Now the second part is praising God from the earth, verses 7 to 14.

And the order is in reverse here. It goes from the depths right up to humanity, the crown of creation. From the highest of the heavens now to the great sea creatures and all deeps, the depths, both of the sea and the land.

Now very often these are associated with God's enemies. The sea, the raging sea which he controls, the haunt of the powers of evil, of Leviathan, of the monster.

But in face of the greatness of God, these threats dwindle. Now like Psalm 95, the sea is his for he made it. The mountain peaks belong to him.

The very place the ancient world believed their gods inhabited. They belong to Yahweh, God of Israel. And the sea, the deep sound, this deep sounding bass note as part of the choir.

[16 : 45] Then he turns to the weather. Fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind, fulfilling his word. Just imagine this as Sam had been written by a glass region.

Continual rain and mist and greyness fulfilling his word. We'd still come on. But the point is we're being taken behind secondary causes here.

These belong to him. The weather belongs to him. I mean, after all, what do we have to talk about if it weren't for the weather? Dr. Johnston, the great English writer who compiled the first English dictionary once said, when two Englishmen, it applies to Scotsman as well, when two Englishmen meet, they instantly tell each other what both must know and state of the weather.

I often used to say to the guys at Cornhill, you'll have preached your heart out. You'll be going to the door feeling that nobody can be moved except you and what will they say to you? Oh, it's a cold day or it's a rainy night or something like that.

But the weather fascinates us. What would we say if we were in Central Africa? It was sunny today and six months' time it's still going to be sunny. But anyway, the weather belongs to the Lord, his wind, his spirit.

[18 : 01] And very often it shows, let me read from the line The Witch and the Wardrobe as the white witch's power is fading. I don't know what happens. Wonderful things were happening.

Every moment the patches of green grew bigger and the patches of snow grew smaller. Every moment more and more of the trees shook off their robes of snow. Soon, wherever you looked, instead of white shapes, you saw the dark green affairs of the black prickly bent branches of bare oaks and beeches and elms.

Then the mist turned from white to gold and presently cleared away altogether. Shafts of delicious sunlight struck down onto the forest floor.

There was no trace of the fog. Now the sky became bluer and bluer. In the wide glades there were primroses. A light breeze sprang up which scattered drops of moisture from the swaying branches and carried cool delicious scents.

The larches and birches were covered with green laburnums with gold. Ah, Tav, and a foretaste of the new creation. This is no thaw, said the dwarf.

[19 : 08] This is spring. Your winter has been destroyed, I tell you. This is Aslan's doing. The whole of the created order, including the weather, belongs to him.

In the animal world as well, beasts and all livestock, verse 10, I suppose that's referring to both domesticated animals and wild animals.

Look at Job. The Lord takes Job on a tour, basically, of many untamed animals which have part, which are part of his creation.

And in the new creation, of course, the animals are in total harmony with the humans. The wolf flying down with the lamb, little child playing by the serpent's den, and so on.

These wonderful pictures of the new creation. And the creatures of the soil and creatures of the air, creeping things and flying birds.

[20 : 10] The whole of the created order belongs to him. The old hymn says he's got the whole world in his hand. And that's a simpler way of saying what this psalm says much more powerfully and poetically.

And now we come to the crown of creation, humanity called to praise. And it's the whole of humanity, kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth, high and low, rich and poor.

It has no age barriers, young men and maidens, old men and children. No social barriers, no sexual barriers, no kind of barriers, all called to praise his name.

And unlike the created order, the animate created order, there are reasons given for praise here. Verse 13, let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted, his majesty is above the heaven and the earth.

When we look at the glories of creation, this wonderful, amazing universe that we are privileged to live in, we only see a glimpse.

[21 : 25] It's like we are peering through glass and we're not seeing the full reality. His majesty is above the heaven. He has raised up a horn for his people. The Old Testament itself talks about raising up a horn means giving victory to his people, making them strong.

Praise for all his saints from the people of Israel who are near to him. In other words, humanity, redeemed humanity has even greater reason to praise the Lord because they belong to him.

He is joined to them in covenant. Heaven and earth show his majesty, but he is far above all his works. And in particular, he gives victory and triumph to his people.

and on the day when that is fully realized, then we will see that the praise on earth was true praise. Remember, after all, praising on earth is a statement of faith.

You go out into the street and say to people, Jesus is Lord, or the Lord reigns. There's not much evidence of it, is there? And people will look at you as if you're talking nonsense.

[22 : 37] But on that day, it will be evident. On that day, the praise will be unmistakable, and no one will be able to deny it.

But we are praising in enemy territory. It's said that the cavaliers during the English Civil War trembled when Cromwell's Ironsides raised their sounds.

And is it that the principalities and powers of the dark empires tremble when they hear that Jesus is Lord, Jesus, the name high over all, angels and men before it fall, and devils fear and fly, as Wesley sang.

So he knows his people and he loves them. So this psalm is calling us to join the choir. And it's telling us we have more reason to join the choir than any other created beings in the universe.

Not saying anything about our singing, although I remember once Billy Graham saying that he hoped that in heaven God would give him the kind of voice that his singer Beth Shea had on earth.

[23 : 45] Those of you who've heard Beth Shea will remember that marvelous, marvelous, deep voice. Well, I'm sure in the new creation we'll all have good voices, the kind of voices that some people have now.

So we're called to praise, and this enlarges our sympathy and imagination. Let me finish on this point. It's absolutely amazing and wonderful that God loves us, that God has saved us, that God has prepared for us a destiny of salvation.

But let's not narrow it down to that. It's something far, far bigger. The whole of creation will be renewed, the whole of history will be redeemed, and we will then fully and truly join the choir, which we're called on to join now.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, we realize our contributions to the choir are very often fitful and halting.

Very often they are feeble, and very often we find it difficult. And yet we thank you for this glimpse of your wonderful purposes of grace, not just a place for us, but a whole renewed creation in which do enjoy you and glorify you forever.

[25 : 05] And we thank you for this in Jesus' name. Amen. And so may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always.

Amen.