

Topic: Worship

I've been thinking a lot about the book of Job recently.

I say that because my son Will and I are working together on a book on Job.

But more importantly, I've been thinking about Job

in the light of our present circumstances.

Not that any of us are suffering nearly to the extent that Job did,

but I think our circumstances raise the central question

that confronts us in that book—

It's the question that Satan raises before God—

“Does Job fear God for nothing?”

“Job is a great man with great riches,

a man full of God's blessing.

Sure, it is natural that Job would worship you, God.

But take all those good things away—and then see what happens.”

That's the question, isn't it:

Is our devotion to God,

our worship of him,

dependent on the material blessings we receive from him?

What happens when our healthy, secure, and comfortable life

is turned upside down—

what then?

Is God still worthy of our worship?

Do you fear God for nothing?

If your God is not big enough,

if he is not glorious enough,

if he is not good enough,

if he is not worthy of your highest praise,

then you can guess what will happen when your nice, neat, comfortable world

comes crashing down around you—

“Why bother with God?” you’ll say.

“What good is he, if this is how he treats me?”

Is God worthy of your worship?

I say he is—

but we need the encouragement of his word to reinforce our perception—

and the book of Psalms is a key place to go for that encouragement.

This morning we consider

perhaps the most significant theme in the entire book of Psalms—

it’s the theme of **praise**.

Praise is the proper response to the glorious goodness and beauty of God,

and the psalms help us to believe

that our God is worthy of our worship, no matter what. /

Praise permeates the psalms,

It is the backdrop on which everything else appears.

It recurs like a refrain, over and over again.

But that note of praise of God comes to a climactic crescendo
in the final few entries in this biblical songbook.

This morning I want you to see that the praise of God is right,
it is reasonable,
it is a responsibility,
and finally, that it is a resounding pleasure. /

Turn back with me to Psalm 145.

Psalm 145 is described in the introductory superscript

as a **h#D;llhV;t** [*tihillah*],--a “song of praise,”

and that song begins with these words--

Ps. 145:1--“I will exalt you, my God the King;

I will praise your name for ever and ever.”

And then each of the last five psalms that follow

begins and ends with a call to praise—

using the Hebrew words “**Hallelu-jah!**” which means “**Praise the Lord!**”

That’s ultimately what the psalms are about;

that’s ultimately what the Bible is about;

that’s ultimately what our lives are to be about;

and that’s ultimately what all of creation is to be about—

the praise of God.

Praise is the recognition that our God is worthy of our worship—
no matter what.

And we are called to be people of praise.

As we look at the praise of Psalm 145 this morning
we want to learn more about this thing called praise
so that we can be engaged more meaningfully
is this ultimate activity.

To start, I want to consider a question that many people have in their heads,
even if they never actually articulate it—
and that is, Why is the Lord so insistent that we praise him?

After all, if any of us were to demand that other people
proclaim *our* goodness or wisdom or strength
they would consider us egotistical, if not deranged.

Commanding other people to praise you, that's just not proper.

But God does it all the time.

Now why is that?

V. 3 of our passage points to the answer—

“Great is the LORD and most *worthy* of praise;”
or as some translations put it,
he is “greatly to be praised.”

C.S. Lewis, in his little book on the psalms,
has a helpful discussion of this question
of why God wants us to praise him.¹

He asks us to think about what it means when we say that a picture is “**admirable**”?

We don’t mean that it is admired (though it may be),
for a bad work of art can be admired by millions.
Nor do we mean that it “deserves” admiration,
in the same way that a worker deserves his wages
and will suffer an injustice if he doesn’t get paid.

“The sense in which the picture ‘deserves’ or ‘demands’ admiration,” Lewis writes,
“is rather this:

that admiration is the correct, adequate or appropriate, response to it,
that, if paid, admiration will not be ‘thrown away’,
and that if we do not admire
we shall be stupid, insensible, and great losers,
we shall have missed something.”²

Not to be irreverent with the comparison,

Lewis suggests that God “demands” praise in a similar sense.

To admire God,
that is, to praise him,
is simply to be awake to reality, for he is admirable.

Not to praise God is like being tone deaf,

¹ *Reflections on the Psalms*, pp. 78ff.

² P. 78.

or being color-blind,
or never having known true friendship or love—
it is to live an incomplete and crippled life.

God is worthy of our praise, and he demands it—

because he is the most admirable Object imaginable.

“his greatness no one can fathom,” the psalmist says.

Not to admire God in praise is to be blind to the reality of who he is.

For he is the supremely beautiful and all-satisfying Object./

But there is more to it than that, Lewis suggests.

God demands our praise not only because it is fitting and right,

but also because, in the process of being worshiped

God draws near to his people

and makes his presence known.

There is a sense in which God inhabits the praises of his people.

In our praise of him, he makes himself known to us.

Our praise of God puts us in our proper place before him—

it humbles us, and God will only draw near the humble.

Unlike in paganism, never is there any suggestion in the Bible

that God in any way needs our praise or worship.

He's not like the vain man who is always craving words of affirmation

and whose fragile ego is shattered without it.

Politicians seem obsessed with this kind of praise—

it's how they get elected.

You know the kind of person who apologizes for talking about himself so much,
so he asks you to talk about him for a while.

No, God doesn't need our sacrifices of praise—

There is nothing fragile about God's ego!

"I have no need of a bull from your stall

or of goats from your pens, . . ." the Lord says in Ps. 50.

"If I were hungry I would not tell you,

for the world is mine, and all that is in it" (Ps. 50:9,12).

And anyway, why would God ever look to us to gratify some appetite for praise,
lowly creatures that we are.

The majestic angelic host could perform the task far better.

As Lewis writes, "I don't want my dog to bark approval of my books."

Speaking of dogs, makes me think of the dog we once had—

Kali could look at a sunset,

and she could cock her head when she did,

But I am certain she had absolutely no appreciation of its beauty.

Such appreciation was beyond her capability as a dog.

But the point is this—

God has created us so that we can approve of him,

and appreciate him,

and enjoy him,

and it is in that appreciation that we demonstrate

that we are more than dogs,

but human beings created in God's image.

Our praise of God is an expression of, and a privilege of, our human dignity.

We have the gift of aesthetic pleasure—

the joy of experiencing majestic beauty,

the pleasure of seeing moral goodness,

the delight of knowing a personal love.

And God is all of these—beauty, goodness, love, to the utmost degree.

Our ability to praise God is a wonderful gift!

There is a **rightness** to praising God

because of who God is,

and that makes any comparison with our demanding praise for ourselves

entirely inappropriate.

In our praise we experience truth, reality—

in praise we come to experience God.

So Hallelujah!—Praise the Lord!

But that simple command doesn't stand alone.

It is not a Hare Krishna mantra to chant endlessly in meditation

as worshippers try to empty their minds of all conscious thought

and work themselves into some state of spiritual ecstasy.

“**Hallelujah**” is not a call to a mindless emotional stupor.

When you read the psalms you see that the call to praise God

is accompanied by a list of reasons why giving praise to God
is not only the right thing to do,
it is also the logical and reasonable thing to do.

The essence of biblical worship is a reasonable response to the revelation of God.

Our praise flows from the truth of who God is
based on how he has made himself known
through his acts in history
and the way in which those acts in history
are interpreted for us through his Word.

Biblical worship doesn't *empty* the mind,
it *fills* the mind—
it fills the mind with the revelation of God—
the revelation of his character, his actions, his purposes and his promises.
All these give substance to our worship.

That's why when we worship together,
we often begin with songs that speak of who God is and what he has done,
before we move to songs that express how we feel.

That's not to say that we can't use some simple chorus to express our love for God,
so long as that simple expression of love
is set within a context of truth about who God is
and why he is to be loved.

Biblical worship is rational.

It may be more than that, but it is not less.

This is very evident here—

In v. 3 the psalmist says, **“Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise,”**
and much of the rest of the psalm declares why this is so.

The Lord is worthy of praise in v. 8

because he is **“gracious and compassionate,**
slow to anger and rich in love.”

v. 9—**“The Lord is good to all.”**

This is the basic nature of God—

Remember that little prayer—“God is great and God is good.

Let us thank him for this food.”

That’s the essence of all theology.

God is **“gracious and compassionate,**

slow to anger and rich in love.”

The Lord is good to all.”

Those with an ear for biblical echo

might recognize that the wording of v. 8

goes back to God’s revelation of himself on Mt. Sinai,

repeated almost word for word.

There the Lord revealed his name, his nature, to Moses—

He passed in front of Moses proclaiming,

“The LORD (Yahweh), the Lord (Yahweh),

the compassionate and gracious God,

slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6).³

This became one of the most often quoted descriptions of the Lord in the Old Testament,
and that description of him became fulfilled,

it’s meaning is filled out,

by the coming of God’s Son, in love, dying on a cross.

This is the God we worship—

the God who has revealed himself to his people throughout history

as a compassionate and gracious God.

This God is worthy of our praise.

He is worthy of our praise because, in v. 14,

he is a God who has a special concern for the lowly and downtrodden—

“The Lord upholds all those who fall

and lifts up all who are bowed down.”

As Jesus put it,

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,

for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

We can look to him in our time of need with confidence.

He will be our protector—our Rock, our Fortress, our salvation.

And he will be our provider—

v. 15—**“The eyes of all look to you,**

and you give them their food at the proper time.

You open your hand

³ Cf. also Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:13; 103:8; 11:4; 112:4; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2.

and satisfy the desires of every living thing.”

The Lord himself, and the Lord alone,

can satisfy our deepest desires,

for he created us.

He knows how we are made,

he knows our needs--

The Lord knows our need for **significance**—

our desire to know that our lives matter,

that our lives have a purpose,

that our days on earth are not just futile and meaningless.

It is God alone who can give our lives an eternal significance.

The Lord knows our need for **belonging**—

that desire for a community of caring,

a place where we are accepted,

a family of committed relationships.

It is God alone who can draw us into his family as his sons and daughters

and place us among his people in the church,

which is to be this place of belonging.

And the Lord knows our need for **love**—

that desire to know and be known,

to come out of ourselves and give of ourselves,

even as we are forgiven and loved.

It is God alone who can love us with a pure love, a gracious love,

a love that nothing can destroy.

This is why he is worthy of our praise.

What convinces you that God is “**the compassionate and gracious God,
slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness**”?

Can you look to the way he has dealt with you in the past?

Can you hear the testimonies of other Christians

who have found God to be faithful to them in their hardships?

Can you be encouraged by the testimony of Scripture

and the ways God has worked among his people through the ages?

Can you look supremely at the revelation of God in Jesus Christ—

who died for us and rose again

as a demonstration of his love?

Our God is worthy of praise—

“The LORD is trustworthy in all his promises

and faithful in all he does.”

And he has revealed his love and faithfulness in history.

He is a rock on which we can depend./

But there’s something else here, another reason for praise—

Look at v. 20—“**The LORD watches over all who love him,**

***but all the wicked he will destroy.*”**

The Lord is slow to anger,

but that does not mean he is *without* anger.

No, wickedness necessarily gives rise to his wrath,

It is the necessary response of his holiness.

And he will not endure evil indefinitely.

One day all wickedness will be destroyed.

That's one quality of the character of God that some people find hard to praise him for.

Some even see it as sub-Christian,

or at least as an offense to modern liberal sensitivities.

But the psalmist sees it as one of the reasons that the Lord is worthy of our praise.

Why is that?

Because a God who didn't care about evil,

a God who didn't do something about it,

would be less than fully good.

Without the judgment of God upon the wicked

there could be no such thing as justice.

Ultimately even the notions of good and evil themselves

would become empty and meaningless.

But God "**is righteous in all his ways**" (v. 17).

The Bible is not embarrassed by the judgment of God,

as are so many in our modern world.

David the psalmist says he is worthy of praise

precisely because he is a righteous judge.

He knows there can be no heaven without a hell,

for if there is to be a world of peace and justice

there can be no accommodation with the devil,

there can be no appeasement of the wicked,
there can be no toleration of moral rebellion in the kingdom of God.⁴

Evil must be shown to be what it is,
and it must be vanquished.

Only then will the goodness of God and the righteousness of God
be evident to all forever.

Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise.

“I will exalt you, my God the King;

I will praise your name for ever and ever.

Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever.

Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;

his greatness no one can fathom”

Could we ever begin to understand the greatness of a God

who creates a universe,

and sets the innumerable stars in place?

a God who formed the majesty of the Swiss Alps,

who sends the rains that bring forth the flowers of spring?

Can you understand a God who rules over the affairs of nations?

“his greatness no one can fathom.”

⁴ Cf. Clements, *Songs of Experience*, p. ?.

This psalm begins with words of personal praise.

“I will exalt you, my God the King;
I will praise your name for ever and ever.”

But then notice how psalmist’s eyes turn outward to the world

in proclaiming God’s greatness to others.

v.4--One generation commends your works to another;
they tell of your mighty acts.

v.5--They speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty,

. . .

v.6--They tell of the power of your awesome works, . . .

v. 7--They celebrate your abundant goodness
and joyfully sing of your righteousness.

v.10--All your works praise you, O LORD;
your faithful people will extol you.

v.11--They will tell of the glory of your kingdom
and speak of your might,”

And why do they do this?--

v.12 --"so that all people may know of your mighty acts
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. “⁵

⁵ The same idea is expressed in Ps. 67--

“May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us,
so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.

May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you.”

Though praise is a personal act that comes from deep within the heart--

praise in a Bible is also a public act--

it is a confession before God's people

and before the world.

I think of 1 Peter 2:9—"You are a chosen people . . .

so that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness

into his wonderful light."

The psalmist knows God to be so great

that he feels he must tell others about him.

Again, Lewis makes the observation that we human beings

almost always spontaneously praise whatever we enjoy and value.

And we not only praise it,

we want other people to experience it and praise it also—

"Oh, you've just got to see this movie. It was incredible!"

"This book I read was fantastic—You must read it."

Even sporting events—

"Wasn't that a great game yesterday! Did you see it?"

Let me tell you what happened!"

In fact, it is almost as if the enjoyment we experience is not complete

until we share it with other people.

So it is with praising God—

anyone who has experienced his majesty and glory,

his goodness and grace--

they want to tell other people about it.

I use the word **responsibility** to describe this—

the responsibility of praise, for it is that.

David ends this psalm on that note in v. 21—

“My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD.

Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever.”

It is our responsibility to help every creature see that God is worthy of our praise.

You could say that the first purpose of the church is to worship God,

for that is the one thing we do that will endure forever,

and church’s second purpose is to make worshippers of the whole world.

“Missions exist because worship doesn’t,” John Piper says.

That’s why the Psalms are filled with that expression—*Hallelujah*--

"Praise the Lord."

That’s not just an expression of my personal feeling--

it’s a command to others.

True worshipers desire that the whole world

recognizes who God is and responds rightly.

If you are a true worshiper of God

it ought to grieve you that our great and loving God

does not receive the honor and worship that he deserves

from all people.

In a sense, that is the command of the gospel--

to praise God for his grace in Christ--

and to bow in worship.

And it is only through the gospel that we can worship God rightly.

I suspect that often our witness is weak

because our worship is shallow.

We ourselves haven't tasted that the Lord is good.

We ourselves haven't humbled ourselves before his greatness,

and become lost in wonder at his majesty and glory.

We do not fear his utter holiness.

We have nothing that we're excited about--

nothing that drives us to share anything with our friends and neighbors.

In that sense worship motivates our witness.

It is the supreme motivation--

that everyone in the whole earth may offer praise to our great God.

That every knee shall bow and every tongue confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Our praise comes with a responsibility./

But I don't think responsibility is exactly the right word,

for it makes it sound as if it's just a duty,

and it can't be just that.

For the praise of God is to be our highest delight.

It is to be a **resounding pleasure**.

v. 4—“One generation commends your works to another; . . .

v. 7 “They celebrate your abundant goodness
and joyfully sing of your righteousness.”

In the opening paragraph of his classic account of his own spiritual journey,
the *Confessions*,

Saint Augustine says this:

“You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised;
great is your power,
and your wisdom is immeasurable.”

. . . to praise you is the desire of man

You stir man to take pleasure in praising you,
because you have made us for yourself,
and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

The Lord has made us for himself.

He has made us such that our greatest pleasure is to be found in praising him—
for in praising God
we are appreciating, loving, delighting in the worthiest object possible.

The Scottish catechism says that the chief end of man is to glorify God
and to enjoy him forever,
and in heaven we will discover that these are the same thing.

“In commanding us to glorify Him,
God is inviting us to enjoy him.”⁶

We long for that day.

Until then, Lewis suggests, we are merely tuning our instruments.

“The tuning up of the orchestra can be itself delightful,” he says,
“but only to those who can in some measure, however little,
anticipate the symphony.”⁷

So we continue to gather weekly for worship,
however we can in these quarantine days,
to praise God.

And our “services” could be described as just attempts at worship,
and only rarely do we catch even a glimpse of the fullness that is to come.

As with tuning an instrument,
there may be more duty among us than delight.

But the duty exists for the purpose of the delight.

Lewis uses this image:

“When we carry out our ‘religious duties’
we are like people digging channels in a waterless land,
in order that when at last the water comes, it may find them ready. . . .
[But t]here are happy moments, even now, when a trickle creeps along the dry beds;
and happy [are the] souls to whom this happens often.”⁸

⁶ Lewis, Psalms, p. 82.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Our praise is to be the conduit through which the delightful, joyful experience of God
is to flow.

And it will flow—

it will flow as the Lord causes it to flow—

the rivers of delight,

the resounding pleasure that comes through the praise of God.

So the book of Psalms concludes with the theme of praise.

I was reminded by one writer⁹

that in placing this burst of praise at the end,

the book of Psalms is very different from our hymn books.

Our hymn books begin with songs of praise,

and then peter out at the end with all sorts of indexes, acknowledgments,

songs for special occasions, and the Star Spangled Banner.

No so with the Psalms.

Many of the earlier psalms emerge out of experiences of conflict, of struggle,

of heartache and lament,

but the final psalms are pure praise.

Maybe that's significant,

for in the Bible praise is where the people of God end up,

not necessarily where they begin.

⁹ Clements, *Songs of Experience*, p. 205.

Our words of praise—whether spoken or sung—
they are in that sense words of hope,
words of aspiration,
words that express what we wish were true of us,
but right now, we are not there.

We're still tuning up.

And God will use the experiences of life to sharpen our praising skills.
But the glorious symphony of praise is still to come,
and every once in a while, if we listen hard, we just might here a faint echo
of those heavenly strains.

But for now—we sometimes struggle—I struggle—with praise.

Why is praise sometimes hard for us?

Let me be very clear—

it is not the fault of our music.

Music is often a wonderful means of expressing praise—

music lifts our hearts,

and I confess that one of the things I miss most in these days

is our singing together in praise of God.

But don't think that if only we could have one of those professional praise bands,
then you could really worship.

Or if only we had those vibrant African praise songs that causes you to dance,
then I could enjoy praising God.

Or, for some of you, if only we had a proper pipe organ,
then your heart could truly praise God.

No, when we fail to worship God, the fault is not in our music,
the fault is in ourselves.

Worship is a moral and spiritual enterprise.

It is when we are purged of sin,
then we will praise God as we ought.

Jesus says that only the pure in heart will see God.

When our hearts are pure,
then they can be filled with the pleasure of praise.

So if you find worship difficult,
if you wish you could find more enjoyment in praising God,
don't look for some music style,
or Christian worship leader,
or some worship technique to solve your problem.

Instead look to the cross of Christ—
which alone can wash your heart clean.

Look to the Resurrection of Christ—
which alone can give you new life, new power.

Look to Christ and take heart,
for if you look to him in faith,
he will make your faltering efforts of praise acceptable to God,
and present them to the Father as a fragrant offering,
pleasing to him.

And one day your praise will rise before the throne of glory
with such passion, such purity, and in such unadulterated pleasure

that you will think that you are in heaven—
for you will be,
praising God forever!

Prayer—

- 1 I will exalt you, my God the King;
I will praise your name for ever and ever.
 - 2 Every day I will praise you
and extol your name for ever and ever.
 - 3 Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;
his greatness no one can fathom.
-

Closing—*King Forevermore*

Benediction:

“You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being.”

Jude 24,25 To him who is able to keep you from falling

and to present you before his glorious presence

without fault and with great joy--

to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority,

through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

April 29, 2020

The Gift of Praise

Ps. 145

It is appropriate that the book of the Psalms ends on the theme of praise, for surely praise is the dominant act embodied in this divinely inspired poetry. This morning the psalmist shows us that giving praise to God is right, it is reasonable, and that it comes with a responsibility. But in the end, the praise of God is to be our greatest pleasure.

I. The Rightness of Praise

“Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise”—v.3

II. The Reasons for Praise—

“The Lord is good to all”—v.9

III. The Responsibility of Praise—

*“They will tell of the glory of your kingdom . . .
so that all men may know of your mighty acts.”—vv. 11, 12*

IV. The Resounding Pleasure of Praise—

*“They will celebrate your abundant goodness
and joyfully sing of your righteousness.”—v.7*

The Greatness of the Gift of Praise!

Sermon Response:

The Gift of Praise

Psalm 145

- Why should God want our praise? Why should he demand it?
- Though they can be very similar, how is praising God different from thanking him?
- What do you find most praiseworthy about God?
- What events in your life help you to affirm the goodness and faithfulness of God?
- What helps you to appreciate the greatness and grandeur of God?
- What helps you to appreciate the holiness and righteousness of God?
- Have you experienced the “resounding pleasure” of praise? What was the context? What was it like? How is that experience a gift?
- What hinders our ability to praise God?
- *•Have a time of prayer in which the prayers begin with the words “I praise you, Lord, for . . .”

