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THE PRIORITY OF PRAISE

Psalms 150

By

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November 7, 1993

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Psalms: Lesson 26

The Priority Of Praise Psalm 150

There were two farmers, one an optimist, the other a pessimist. The optimist would exclaim, "Wonderful sunshine!" The pessimist would respond, "I think it's going to scorch the crops." The optimist would say, "Fine rain!" The pessimist would come back with, "I'm afraid it may turn into a flood."

One day the optimist said to the pessimist, "Have you seen my new bird dog? He's really something!" The pessimist said, "You mean that mutt penned up behind your house? He don't look like much to me." The optimist said, "Let's go hunting."

So they went out and shot some ducks. The ducks landed on the pond. The optimist ordered his dog to get the ducks. The dog obediently responded. But instead of swimming after the ducks, the dog walked on top of the water, retrieved the ducks, and walked back on top of the water!

The optimist was beaming as he said to the pessimist, "Now, what do you think of that?" The pessimist replied, "Can't swim, can he?"

Have you ever been around someone like that--a gloomy, negative person who always sees the dark side of things? The glass is not half full; it's half empty. If you propose a plan, the pessimist points out 47 reasons it won't work.

Maybe you wrestle with that tendency yourself. Somewhere you picked up a negative, pessimistic mind-set toward life. Many Christians even justify their negativism from the Bible. They focus on the deteriorating state of the world and the apostate condition of the church. And they seem to have a built-in knack for shooting down anybody who tries to do anything to rectify the situation.

What is the answer for this problem of negativism? "The power of positive thinking," responds Norman Vincent Peale. But at the risk of being labeled a negative pessimist, I must point out that there is a fatal flaw in Peale's approach: It leaves God out. The

power of positive thinking is a man-centered mental process that works for anyone from an atheist to a Zen Buddhist. Clearly, a humanistic approach which encourages us to “look on the bright side” is not adequate.

The biblical solution to the problem of pessimism and negative thinking is to be God-centered in our thinking. To be God-centered does not mean that we deny problems or put on rose-colored glasses. But it does mean that we view problems from God’s perspective. And as we focus on God in every situation, we will become people characterized by praise. Praise is the solution to pessimism!

As you come to the end of the Psalms, God does not want you to miss the priority of praise. Each of the last five psalms (146-150) begins and ends with the Hebrew word, “Hallelujah!” (Praise Yah = the Lord). Praise is the theme of each of these psalms. It is like a mounting crescendo at the climax of a great symphony. The theme of praise has dominated all the psalms, but as the end approaches, the “conductor” brings in each section of the orchestra in one grand finale of praise. Psalm 150 is the climax of the climax, where we are exhorted 13 times in six short verses to praise the Lord. It is telling us that ...

God’s people should be caught up with praising Him.

I wonder how many of us could honestly say, “Praising God characterizes my life”? The extent to which we cannot say that reflects the extent to which we are not God-centered. We’re not to be praise-centered, but God-centered. A God-centered person will be a person of praise. As God’s people, we should be focused on Him in every situation, and therefore we should be people of praise.

Psalm 150 gives us the *where, why, how, and who* of praise. It does not give us, per se, the *what* of praise. Just so we’re clear at the outset, when we’re talking about praising God we are not talking about repeating “Praise the Lord” over and over. We are talking about thinking and/or speaking well of God’s perfect attributes or great acts. Praise can be expressed through singing and music (including clapping, dancing, lifting our hands, kneeling, lying prostrate, etc.), through testimony and thanksgiving, prayer, sacrifici-

cial service, and giving. If we want praise to characterize our lives, the psalmist would have us understand ...

1. The where of praise: Everywhere (150:1).

God's sanctuary refers to the place of worship on earth where God's people gathered. In the psalmist's day, this was the temple in Jerusalem; in ours, it is the church.

The "mighty expanse" ("firmament") refers to the heavens, and is a call to all of the heavenly hosts to praise God. Thus the psalmist is saying, "Praise God everywhere! Praise Him on the earth! Praise Him in the heavens!" Derek Kidner writes, God's "glory fills the universe; His praise must do no less" (*Psalms* [IVP], 2:491).

The word "sanctuary" relates especially to the corporate gatherings of God's people. It means that the praise of God should be our main business when we gather as the church. We should not gather primarily to meet with our friends, although that is an aspect of our meetings. We should not gather primarily to win the lost, although I pray that many without Christ will be brought to repentance. We should not come primarily to have our needs met, although that will often happen. We gather primarily to meet with God, to corporately offer praise to Him. "Enter His gates with thanksgiving, and His courts with praise" (Ps. 100:4). It is my objective every week through the preaching of God's Word that each one present will encounter God.

Our corporate worship will be enhanced if each member has been praising God wherever we're at throughout the week. Each of us should begin our day by focusing our thoughts on God, on who He is and on what He has graciously done for us. As we do, our hearts will be filled with praise, adoration, and joy. Our days at work, at home, at school, or wherever we are should be punctuated with thoughts and expressions of praise. Sundays should be the great crescendo as the many individual worshipers gather corporately to praise our great God.

If we want praise to characterize our lives, the psalmist also would have us understand...

2. The why of praise: every act and attribute of God (150:2).

Why should we praise God? Because of what He has done ("His mighty deeds") and because of who He is ("His excellent greatness").

A. We should praise God for His mighty deeds.

Think your way through the Psalms and you will be reminded of some of the great things God has done. As we saw in Psalm 139, He formed you while you were in the womb, and ordained all the days of your life. As we discovered in Psalm 22, He sent the Messiah to die for our sins. Psalm 23 shows us His providing for our every need as our good Shepherd. Psalm 32 tells of the forgiveness of sin which God gives to the repentant sinner. Psalm 57 describes how God is sufficient in a time of trial. Psalm 71 taught us of God's grace for old age. Psalm 119 extols God's Word which He has graciously given to guide us. Truly, God has done mighty deeds!

Think of how he has dealt with you. He chose you in Christ before the foundation of the world. He sought you when you were dead in your transgressions and sins, when you were hostile toward Him. He caused you to be born again to a living hope. He has dealt graciously and patiently with you to lead you to the place where you are today. And He who began this good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:6). Praise God for His mighty deeds!

B. We should praise God for His excellent greatness.

Apart from His many mighty deeds, God is worthy of praise simply for who He is. He is perfect, lacking in nothing. He is "the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God" (1 Tim. 1:17); "the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16). "Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created" (Rev. 4:11). "Praise God according to His excellent greatness."

Thus if we would be people of praise, we must understand the *where* of praise--that God is to be praised in all of heaven and earth. We must understand the *why* of praise--that God is to be praised

for His mighty acts and His perfect attributes. But also, we must understand ...

3. The how of praise: with everything you've got (150:3-5)!

The sense of these verses is, "Pull out the stops and give it everything you've got!" Use your breath to blow the trumpet; use your fingers to play the harp and lyre; use your whole hand to hit the tambourine (timbrel); move your whole body in the dance. There are stringed instruments, wind instruments, and percussion instruments (vv. 4-5). It sounds more like a Disneyland parade than a Sunday morning worship service!

Maybe, just maybe, we somehow have picked up the wrong idea about worship. Dostoyevski has the Devil say in *The Brothers Karamazov*, "Everything would be transformed into a religious service: it would be holy, but a little dull" (in *Christianity Today* [11/21/80], p. 29). Isn't that often our concept of worship--holy, but a little dull? Verses 3-5 suggest two indispensable elements of worship:

A. Festivity

There is a festive, joyous air to these verses. Worship is not to be a somber, formal exercise, devoid of joy. Yes, we need to be reverent, as is fitting in the presence of our holy God. Of course there is a place for soberness, when we confess our sins and think on the Lord's death. But God also wants His people to celebrate His goodness. We're not at God's funeral; we serve a risen Savior! Our faces should reflect that we're enjoying God and His bountiful provision for us in Jesus.

I read of a man who came to Christ from a non-religious background, so he didn't know the Christian jargon. When he was baptized, he came up out of the water clapping his hands for joy, shouting, "Hot dog! Hot dog! Hot dog!" (Paul Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations* [Assurance Publishers], # 2831). He was excited about God!

At this point you may be saying, "Now wait a minute! That's not my personality! I'm a quiet and reserved person." Oh really? It's Super-bowl Sunday. Your favorite team is behind by five points in the final seconds of the game. On the last play of the game the quarterback for your team drops back and throws a long pass. The

end grabs the pass, outruns the defense, and steps into the end zone to give your team a one-point victory. How quiet and reserved are you at that moment? You see, we all have things that get us excited. We just happen to get excited about the trivial instead of the crucial.

To stick with the football analogy for a minute, praise is a natural response to a tremendous play. When you see a spectacular play, it's not only natural but even necessary, to fully enjoy the game, to shout, "Wow! Did you see that catch?" You want to share the excitement with someone else who loves the game. Praise is both a natural and necessary response to fully appreciate the object being praised. It needs to be expressed.

But what if your wife doesn't appreciate the game? You shout, "Wow, did you see that play!" She shakes her head and says, "What's the big deal? Who cares, anyway?" You think to yourself, "She doesn't love the game." If you love the game, you get excited about it. If you love the Lord, you're going to get excited about gathering with His people to praise His name. If you come to church with no preparation, hassled about some problem, glancing constantly at your watch and thinking, "Let's get this show over with so I can get on with the day's activities," you'll never praise God as you should. The second element in worship is ...

B. Fervency

You've got to be all there. You must focus your mind on God. You must concentrate on the significance of the songs and the words of Scripture. You have to shake off apathy in worship as a soul-killing sin. You must make praise your priority and dedicate your whole being to the process.

When the billionaire Howard Hughes died, the public relations director of his Summa Corporation asked the casinos in Las Vegas, where Hughes had vast holdings, for a minute of silence out of respect for Hughes. The message went out over the public address systems, and the normally noisy casinos fell silent. Housewives stood uncomfortably, clutching their paper cups of coins at the slot machines; the blackjack games paused; and at the crap tables stickmen cradled the dice in the crooks of their wooden wands. Then a pit boss looked at his watch, leaned forward, and

whispered to the stickman, "Okay, roll the dice. He's had his minute." (From "Our Daily Bread," 1977.) Some respect!

Yet I can't help but wonder if that isn't the way we often view worship: "Let's give God His hour," so we can get on with the things we'd really rather be doing. But we ought to come with the fervency and expectancy as if Jesus Himself were going to be present, because He is here. He deserves our giving Him everything we've got in worship.

But the psalmist would not only have us understand the *where*, the *why*, and the *how* of praise. He also wants us to grasp ...

4. The Who of praise: everything that breathes (150:6).

The only qualification for praising God is that you breathe. (That may disqualify a few of you here!) The most striking feature of this psalm is the fact that in six short verses we are commanded to praise God no less than 13 times! In the Hebrew, the greatest number of words between any two "Hallelujahs" is four, and that only once; in every other instance, there are just two words between one Hallelujah and the next (in Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* [Baker], VII:451). Every third word is a command to praise God!

The fact that God can command us to praise Him means that praise is not just a feeling based upon your mood or circumstances. Praise is in part a feeling, but it is not at its heart a feeling. Praise is a matter of obedience to our great God. It stems from deliberately focusing on Him. It is the result of being willfully God-centered in your thinking. If you are breathing, praising God is not an option; it is your responsibility.

Conclusion

Thus the message of the psalms, and especially of Psalm 150, is that God's people should be caught up with praising Him. But maybe you don't know how to do it. I'd like to walk you through what a life of praise looks like, first individually, and then corporately.

Individual praise: You get up on Monday morning and the first thing that pops into your mind is the pressures of the week. You stare at your alarm, wondering why it went off 20 minutes

earlier than you need to get ready for the day. Then you remember, you want to be a person of praise! You set your alarm so you could spend a few minutes with the Lord to start your day. So you grab your Bible, open to the Psalms (or whatever portion you're reading), and focus your thoughts on how great God is and on what He has done for you.

You pray, "Lord, You are the eternal God, the almighty Creator. Thank You for loving me and saving me from my sins. Your mercies are fresh every morning. Great is Your faithfulness! You ordained today for me, even the minor details, even before You formed me in my mother's womb. Your purpose is to shape me into the image of Jesus Christ. Now, Father, I've got these problems" And you cast your burdens on the Lord. Maybe He puts a song on your heart that you begin to sing or hum as you get ready for your day.

Do you see how praise helps to put things in perspective? And throughout the day you pause to focus on Him, to pray about problems that come up, to give thanks to Him for who He is. You're putting God at the center of your life, so your life is becoming filled with praise. Then Sunday rolls around:

Corporate praise: You wake up and think, "Praise God! It's the Lord's Day! I have the privilege of worshiping God together with His saints!" You hurry to get ready so that you arrive at church on time. On the way, perhaps you sing a song together, or you remind your kids of the purpose of worshiping God. As you enter, the pianist is playing a hymn you know, and you think of the words. Or, you look at the bulletin and notice that the pastor is speaking on Psalm 150, so you read it prayerfully and ask God to help you focus on Him. You pray silently for the pastor and for others present, that we all might meet with the living God.

The first Hymn is announced, and you stand and focus on the words, "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation" You sing with vigor because the words have such meaning to you. You don't allow yourself to be distracted by the latecomers. Your focus is on the Lord. As you continue to sing, you are drawn more and more into His presence. Since others are also focusing on the Lord and singing with all their might, the sound of the music lifts

you up into God's presence. You close your eyes and lift your hands in praise and adoration as you worship Him.

There is a brief pause in the worship as we recognize the visitors and share in the news of the coming week. As we go to prayer, you again focus on the Lord. As you give to the Lord's work, you thank Him for providing for your needs and pray that He will use your gift to further His work and that He will give you more to give. You then focus on the words of the praise songs. As the Scripture is read, you pray silently, "Lord, open my heart to Your Word. May Your Holy Spirit teach me and reveal Christ to me today." You listen attentively and eagerly to God's Word as it is preached. As the sermon is concluded, you ask God to help you obey as you yield yourself again to Him. You pray for others, who may not know Christ or who may be resisting His Lordship. You have met with God and praised Him with His people.

After the service, you look around for those who may not know anyone, and you extend your friendship to them. The newcomer is impressed with what he has seen. He wants to hear more about the God whose praise characterizes your life and the life of this church. So you arrange to meet with him during the week. You didn't come to "get something out of the service"; you came to worship and praise God. But as you leave, you realize how much you received because you made praise your priority, not just on Sunday, but throughout the week. You are a person whose life is becoming more and more centered on God, caught up with praising Him.

Discussion Questions

1. How can I fight my own spiritual apathy and lukewarmness?
2. Is it hypocritical to praise God when you don't feel like it? Why/why not?
3. Are we supposed to praise God at all times? Isn't that unrealistic?

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