

There are only Mockers and Praisers

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[0 : 00] Our first reading this morning is Psalm 150. Praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary. Praise him in his mighty heavens.

Praise him for his mighty deeds. Praise him according to his excellent greatness. Praise him with trumpet sound. Praise him with lute and harp. Praise him with tambourine and dance. Praise him with strings and pipe. Praise him with sounding cymbals. Praise him with loud clashing cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord. Thank you very much indeed. Thank you again for your invitation, Simon. Thank you for your welcome, all of you. Thank you to Jackie for leading us in prayer for Cornhill. Much appreciate that. I'd be grateful if you would turn back to the first reading.

[0 : 58] Psalm 150. I'm going to be preaching from that. Simon has led us in prayer for the preaching and for the listening.

So I won't do that again. Let me start with a question. Do you ever think that or feel that God owes you one? Do you ever feel that God has treated you unfairly?

That he's given you a rough deal? That it is, as it were, God's turn to buy the drinks? I mean, you wouldn't put it quite like that in church. But do you ever feel like that privately?

I sometimes do. And I think that feeling is the root reason why we find Psalm 150 so difficult. I'll come back to that later.

I think it was Augustine who said that there are only mockers and praisers. That is to say there are mockers or grumblers and there are those who praise.

[2 : 00] That's all there is in the human race. Everybody is one or the other. However, when Psalm 150 was read out to us and read so well and clearly, did you immediately want to join in?

Praise the Lord, which is the translation of the Hebrew word hallelujah, is not an exclamation. We don't say hallelujah. It's an exhortation.

Hallelujah means let us praise. Come on, guys, let's get off our backsides and praise. And Yah is short for Yahweh, the Lord in capital letters, the covenant God of the Bible.

And when it was read, did you immediately find, welling up in your heart, a sense of, yes, you don't need to tell me twice. I'll do it.

I know that culturally most of us looking around are, like me, very buttoned up, rather Anglo-Saxon, a little bit reserved. We're not like our Jamaican friends.

[3 : 04] We've got three Jamaicans on Cornhill at the moment and they're tremendous. They find us awfully cold, though, because when they're preaching, they're used to people chorusing, you know, amen, preach it, pastor, that kind of thing.

And I guess that at Grace Church it's probably not your custom to do that. Simon, you'd probably be slightly thrown if they started doing that, wouldn't you? But culture apart, did you find in your heart immediately a sense of, I'm so glad I'm being encouraged to praise God.

Of course, that's exactly what I want to do. My guess is that most of us, if we're honest, will say that the answer to that question must be no, certainly not.

Somebody may say, well, I'm feeling pretty much the opposite. My husband and I fell out while getting difficult children to church. Somebody else may be saying, I'm fed up with my boss or I'm fed up with my PA or my secretary.

I'm fed up with my colleagues. Someone else says, I'm really anxious about our family finances.

Someone else says, I'm really sad about a failed relationship. And I can't concentrate on anything else just now.

[4 : 13] And if you say to me, praise the Lord, well, actually it's absurd because that's the last thing I can possibly do or not wholeheartedly at any rate. Someone else might say, well, hang on a minute, I'm not even a Christian.

I've come to Grace Church because I'm interested and people tell me I'm welcome and that's nice of them. But now I get this emotional preacher shouting at me to praise the Lord. And I don't need that.

I really don't need that. Okay. You've deflated me. I'll admit it. I don't want to sing it either. I don't feel like praising the Lord either.

So let's take a step back. Let's lower the emotional tone. Let's have a little look at Psalm 150 and see what's in it. And then we'll see how we go. I want us to notice five things in this short psalm. First of all, whom we're to praise, the person we're to praise. Second, the place from where we can praise. Third, the reason for praise.

[5 : 17] Why should we praise? Fourth, the manner of praise. How should we praise? And fifth, the participants in praise. Who should praise?

So we'll take those in turn as we go through the psalm. First of all, whom should we praise? The person. The psalm is bracketed by that little word, praise the Lord. Hallelujah.

And the Lord in capital letters, Yahweh, the covenant God of the Bible. This is not just an exhortation to some vague spirituality.

This isn't just an exhortation to praise a sense of the numinous or a sense that there's something beyond this material world. There is something beyond this material world.

But this is not an exhortation to some vague, unshaped spirituality. It's an exhortation to praise the God who's revealed in the Bible.

[6 : 13] So the first thing is, before I can begin to sing this psalm, I need to read the Bible. I need somebody to tell me at least something that's in the Bible of the God whom I'm being exhorted to praise.

That's the first thing. I'm not going to say more on that. Second thing is, the place of our praise. Notice in verse 1, praise God in his sanctuary.

Praise him in his mighty heavens. Well, his mighty heavens means the sky, which is in Bible language up there. And it's, as it were, in poetic language, God's place, which is above our place. And so it's an exhortation that those who are, as it were, up in the heavenlies are to praise God.

You find that explicitly, if you just glance across the page at Psalm 148, the beginning of Psalm 148, exhorts, verse 2, the angels, the hosts of angels, the sun, the moon, the stars, the heavens, the rainwater above the heavens.

It's all in the poetry. All the stuff up there is exhorted to praise God there. But I want to focus in 150, verse 1, on praising God in his sanctuary.

[7 : 34] Literally, it's praise God in his holiness. And if you were brought up in a more traditional Anglican church where they chant psalms in Coverdale's translation, you'll remember that Coverdale translates it, praise God in his holiness.

And in his holiness, it's a word that comes, I think, 45 times in the Psalms. And mostly, I think perhaps every time, it refers to the holy place, that is the temple in the Old Testament.

Praise God in his sanctuary. Praise God in the temple. God's holy hill, as it's sometimes called. So the psalm is not saying praise God wherever you are.

It's saying there's one place from which you can praise God, and that's the temple. And the reason in the Old Testament you could only praise God from the temple was that the temple was the place of sacrifice.

It was the place where a sinful man or woman could go into the presence of a holy God safely, without being burned up, because the right anger of that holy God was poured out on a sacrifice instead of on the sinner.

[8 : 47] And the temple was therefore the place where heaven and earth meet. It was the one place on earth where in the Old Testament you could have access to God, and from which God could hear your praises.

You can't praise God from anywhere. You could only praise God from the sanctuary. It's the place where heaven and earth meet. And that Old Testament language of the temple is a foreshadowing, it's picture language, of the day when the one would walk on earth who called himself a greater than the temple, the Lord Jesus, in Matthew chapter 12, who spoke of his own body and said, destroy

this temple and I'll raise it up in three days.

And who when he died on the cross was the sacrifice to which all the Old Testament sacrifices pointed. So when we read in this psalm, praise God, or we sing praise God in his sanctuary, we understand that that was a foreshadowing.

And what that means is praise God through Jesus. Praise God because Jesus died on the cross, and therefore we have access to God, and through Jesus we can praise and God will hear our praises.

He will not hear the praises of anyone who praises him except in Jesus. That's the place of our praise. Three, not just the person, the Lord, and the place, the sanctuary, but notice in verse 2 the reason for our praise.

[10:19] Why should we praise? Praise him for his mighty deeds. Praise him according to his excellent greatness. One reason I hate some so-called praise songs is that they don't seem to have any content.

And sometimes one writer has said that in contemporary church services, those praise songs that lack solid reasons for praise assail thinking worshippers with empty noise.

Some of us have been in Christian gatherings where that's happened, and I'm just being assailed with empty noise. Praise God, praise the Lord, praise God, praise... And I want to say, oh, shut up. Do you ever feel like that? I think one of the worst churches I've ever preached in was, I'm not going to tell you where it was because I'm going to be very rude about it, it was in East Asia, but I'm not going to be more specific than that.

I don't know why I was preaching there. It was utterly dreadful. The first 45 minutes of the meeting were singing mindless songs of praise, completely vacuous.

[11:25] It was dire. And I thought to myself, I know why Psalm 150 comes at the end of the Psalter. We don't sing it at the beginning, because until we know why we're praising God, we can't sing Psalm 150.

And Psalm 150 says, praise him for his mighty deeds. And his mighty deeds in the Psalms are shorthand for two things.

First of all, they're shorthand for his deeds of creation. And a number of times in the Psalms, we praise God for his mighty deeds in creation, which proves that he's the one true God.

It proves that Satan and all the powers of evil that we were thinking about earlier with Halloween are not an equal and opposite God, you know, like the dark side, fighting it out, equal, and you never quite know who's going to win.

But that there's one creator God, and the God of the Bible is the one creator God, praise him for his acts of power, his mighty deeds. And the second thing that his mighty deeds is shorthand for in the Psalms is redemption, and particularly the Exodus.

[12:39] And his mighty deeds in the Psalms again and again is a reminder that the people of God were slaves in Egypt, powerless and helpless, and they cried out to God.

And he reached out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and he proved that he was stronger than Pharaoh, and he brought them out from slavery to freedom.

And when the Psalmists say praise him for his mighty deeds, they say praise him for the Exodus. Praise him not just for creation, but praise him for redemption, and praise him for all his deeds of rescue.

And again, that's looking forward. The Exodus was just a foreshadowing, looking forward to the great rescue of the cross. But the point I want to draw our attention to is this, that in the Old Testament, when they sang Psalm 150, it was praise which was an expression of faith, even more than it was an expression of experience.

I want just to try and draw this out a little bit. The Psalter begins with Psalm 1 and Psalm 2. And Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 are very important.

[13:53] They are the front door to the Psalter. And they're often preached. And if I had time, I'd preach them as well this morning, but you'd never get lunch if I did. Psalm 1, I'm going to give you an abbreviation of Psalm 1.

Psalm 1 says, people who trust God and walk godly get blessed. People who don't trust God and walk ungodly get cursed, Psalm 1 says.

Most of life doesn't fit with that. Most of life seems to indicate that people who trust God and walk godly have a tough time.

And a number of people who couldn't care less about God have rather a nice easy time. But Psalm 1 says, people who trust God get blessed. Psalm 2 says, God is going to rule the world through a king in Zion, which is shorthand for, well, it's shorthand for the Lord Jesus ruling through the cross. That's what it's shorthand for. And most of life seems to contradict that. Most of life seems to say that's not true. So most of experience says Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 are not true.

[15:01] And since they set the agenda for the whole of the Psalter, that's kind of unsettling. Now the point I want to make is that Psalm 150, which comes obviously at the end of the Psalter, is not there by accident, but it was put there long before anybody knew in experience that godly people are blessed and God's king rules the world.

Psalm 150 was written, I suspect, after the exile in Babylon, when some of the people had come back. We can't be sure exactly when it was written, but it was certainly sung after the exile. And it was sung at a time when there wasn't even a king in Jerusalem. You know, David's line had ended so far as kings were concerned. There weren't any more kings. And godly people certainly weren't blessed.

So in the Old Testament, when you sang Psalm 150, you were praising God because you believed he would keep the promises he'd made, even though it didn't seem like it now.

So it's an expression of faith. And it's an expression of faith that one day God would send the anointed king, the Christ, and would keep his promises.

[16:15] Now for us, we're better off than them, because the anointed king has come. And he's walked on earth, and he's died for our sins, and he's been gloriously raised from the dead.

But it's still an expression of faith to sing this psalm, because we're waiting for his return when every knee will bow before him. And so the point I want to make is this, that the psalm is saying to us, praise God because of his mighty deeds in creation and redemption, and praise God because you believe that one day he's going to prove that all those promises are true.

And therefore, praise can coexist with sadness. Praise can coexist with pressure. Praise can coexist with cares and fears and pain.

We cannot just praise when everything's going well. I take it we're to learn in the school of praise to sing Psalm 150 or to pray Psalm 150 when things are going badly, as an expression of faith that one day God will keep all the promises he's made.

So I came to church this morning, says somebody, and I was anxious and full of cares. That doesn't stop you, my brother or sister, from singing Psalm 150.

[17:36] I came to church this morning, somebody says, full of sorrow and sadness and pain. And I want to say to you, my brother and sister, that doesn't stop you singing or praying Psalm 150.

It's a psalm for all of us at all times and all seasons of life. So there's the person, the Lord revealed in the Bible, the place through Jesus at the cross, the reason because of all he's done and particularly all he will do when Jesus returns.

Now the manner. Notice in verses 3, 4, 5, praise him with trumpet sound, the curved ram's horn, the lute, the harp, stringed instruments, tambourine, percussion, dance, strings, pipe, our sounding cymbals, loud clashing cymbals.

It doesn't matter that we don't know exactly what all those instruments were. The point is there's a lot of them and they're playing very loudly. And I think the point is we're to envisage a gathering in which the music is so loud that we cannot concentrate on anything else.

Do you know sometimes that can be annoying, can't it? One of our sons, his day job is a primary school teacher, but in his spare time he's a DJ. And I remember when he was learning, he had his decks upstairs above our sitting room.

[18:59] And I remember trying to hold a PCC meeting in the sitting room while he had his deck, playing his decks. And I wanted to go upstairs and say, look, look, I cannot, we cannot hear ourselves think with that noise.

You know, the boom, boom. I mean, it's terrific. He's great. He's really, really good. But it wasn't just ideal when we were trying to have a meeting. But I think that's the point. I think the point is that the music engages us and our affections.

You know how it is if you're singing with a large crowd. It can sweep us along in any direction, maybe good or bad direction, but we get swept along by music. And I think the point is saying, let the music sweep you along in the right direction and engage our affections in the service of God.

I, a couple of weeks ago, I was walking past a pub nearest one evening in central London and I couldn't help noticing a young man embracing his girl. And I won't go into details, but it looked as if it was quite a fond embrace, really.

He seemed to be quite engaged. She seemed to be quite engaged in the whole thing. There was some kissing going on and, you know, they did seem to be pretty engaged in the whole thing.

[20 : 08] I thought to myself, you know, maybe that's nice. But then, I want to tell you, this is extraordinary. You're not going to believe this. When I got closer, I wish I could sort of act this out, but if I asked one of the girls to come up, it would be inappropriate, really.

He had his arms around this, well, he had one arm around this girl and he was kissing her, you know, on the mouth. And I noticed to my astonishment that in his right hand, he had his mobile and he was looking, while he kissed her, he was looking out of the corner of his eye at his mobile and he was texting.

Isn't that amazing? My wife, Carolyn, said to me, did the girl know? And I said, I didn't stop to ask her. I texted my sons to tell them about this and one of them texted back and said, that takes multitasking to a new level.

But I think the point is that we must not multitask with God. And the point of this, I take it, is that our praise of God is to be something which ought to be all-engrossing so it shapes our lives, so that we, not just in our meetings, but our lives, are lives of praise to God.

That's the manner of our praise. Lastly, I want us to notice the participants in our praise. We've thought about the person, the God, the Lord revealed in the Bible.

[21 : 28] We've thought about the place. We can praise him and he'll hear our praises in Jesus. We've thought about the reason in creation and redemption, all he's done.

We've thought about the manner, all-engrossing, engaging our affections, our desires, our delights in the praise of God. Now the participants. Verse 6. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. That is to say, every creature that can praise ought to praise. If I can breathe, then a praise is a possibility. If praise is a possibility, praise is a responsibility.

I ought to praise. It's an exhortation to the whole world and to the whole created order. And in a way, evangelism is saying to people, praise the Lord.

Praise the God of the Bible. Don't be a mocker. Don't be a grumbler. Be a praiser. Recognize that everything that we have comes from him. The God of the Bible is the one God who made the world and everything in it.

[22 : 32] He owes us nothing. And everything that we have of value is his gift to us. Every breath we breathe is his gift to us.

Every heartbeat, every mouthful, every kindness, every experience of love or beauty or fulfillment, joy or pleasure is his gift to us.

Every single one. He owes us nothing. We owe him everything. And we always will. And praise is not us trying to pay him back, rather as we might invite you back for dinner because you've invited us to dinner.

Praise is acknowledging our bankruptcy and his generosity. And praise is saying publicly together to God and to other people in the presence of God, we owe you everything.

And we're so grateful for all that you've given us. And particularly, I chose that second reading in Ephesians 1 because of that little refrain to the praise of his glory or the praise of his glorious grace, his generosity to us in Jesus.

[23 : 44] Paul ends Romans chapter 11. Romans 1 right through to chapter 11 is Paul telling us everything that God has done for us. And at the end of it at chapter 11 he says, who has ever given to God that God should repay him.

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. And joining in the chorus of thanks and praise is not an optional extra.

It's not something that keen Christians do, but run-of-the-mill Christians don't do. It is a fundamental mark of convertedness. When in Romans 1 Paul says that by nature we don't, we're idolaters, we don't glorify God as God, or he says give thanks to him.

And giving thanks to him is the fundamental mark that I recognize that I'm bankrupt and he's generous and he's given me so much in the Lord Jesus.

And my coldness and my hardness of heart is evidence that there's something badly wrong in me. And it's a lovely thing sometimes by contrast when you meet an older Christian.

[24 : 58] You meet somebody in old age who's a Christian who's perhaps been bereaved. Perhaps they're in pain and suffering from some debilitating disease. Perhaps they're living in poverty.

Perhaps life is very, very hard for them and full of grief. And yet they are full of thankfulness. You ever met people like that? You know, sometimes you go and visit somebody like that and you think, you come away thinking, they have blessed me whereas I went to try to help them just by thankfulness and praise and gratitude.

It's a wonderful mark of convertedness. And it's such a contrast to the world outside, isn't it? The Monday morning grumbles in the office. It's almost a sort of English ritual, isn't it?

How was your weekend? Well, pretty bad. You know, it's a kind of starter, isn't it? At the water cooler, really, isn't it? In the office. What a wonderful thing to be people of thanks and praise.

There are only mockers and praisers. And so the challenge for us is this. Not as an emotion that we sometimes feel but sometimes don't feel, but as a determination of the will.

[26 : 10] Let me ask you, if you're a Christian believer, will you pray Psalm 150? Will you say in your heart when the exhortation comes, praise the God of the Bible?

Praise the Lord, the God of the Bible. Praise Him in His sanctuary. Praise Him because of the cross and that's where we have access to God. Praise Him for His mighty deeds in creation and redemption.

Praise Him with the help of one another and all the music in the world to engage our affections and emotions. Will you say, yes, I'll join in?

Will you do that? That's a mark of a believer. And it's a mark of a man or woman who one day will be gathered around the throne with men and women from every tribe, every nation, every language praising the God of the Bible.

And I want to encourage you as I encourage myself to do what we sang to one another in the song we've just sung. Come all and tune your hearts to sing to the morning star of grace.

[27 : 20] Wasn't that a good line? Tune your hearts. My heart is often out of tune. By nature, my heart is always out of tune. By nature, my heart is a grumbling heart and a mocking heart.

And I need the help of God and I need your help. I need the help of brothers and sisters when we gather to tune my heart so that not just while we gather but all through this coming week I may be singing the praise of the God of grace and of the God of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's a wonderful thing if we can become Psalm 150 people, don't you think? I asked the Cornhill students if they'd ever heard a sermon on Psalm 150. They'd all heard sermons on Psalms 1 and 2 which are very important psalms.

None of them had heard a sermon on Psalm 150. I'd never heard one. That's why I'm preaching one. I thought I'd have a go. It's not the last one in the Psalter by accident. You know, it's there as the climax of the whole thing.

So will you join me in being and in praying that we will be those who sing this from our hearts to the God of all grace. Let's be quiet for a moment and I'll pray and then we'll have an opportunity for questions.

[28 : 37] Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Lord God, we confess to you that by nature we are mockers rather than praisers. We are grumblers.

We think you owe us something. But we ask that by your grace and in your kindness you would so fill our hearts and our affections with the knowledge and the sense of all that you have given us in creation and in redemption in the Lord Jesus that we become praisers.

We ask it for your honour and glory. Amen.