

Alleluia, Praise the Lord

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[0 : 00] You may like to have open in front of you page 508 in the Bible for Psalms 148 and 49 and 150. And let's pray.

Our Heavenly Father stir up in our hearts a deep felt lifelong praise of you, not only with our lips but in our lives for the glory of you and of your Son Jesus Christ we pray.

Amen. From the highest of heights to the depths of the sea, creation is singing God's majesty. It's a word or line from one of the songs that we occasionally sing in this service but it encapsulates what is being exhorted in Psalm 148.

Psalm 148 in the first half exhorts all of heaven and the heavenly host and the things of the sky and heaven to praise the Lord. And then in the second half it exhorts everything on earth to echo that praise as it and everything in it also praises the Lord.

Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord from the heavens. Praise Him in the heights. That's in effect the summary for the first half of the psalm.

[1 : 18] Exhorting everything that's in the heaven or the highest heavens to praise God. Firstly, the creatures of heaven. Praise Him, all His angels.

Praise Him, all His hosts. The host is like the army, the heavenly army of angelic beings. All of those things that we don't see but inhabit the heavenly realms are exhorted to praise the Lord.

So to the inanimate objects of heaven. Praise Him, sun and moon. Praise Him, all you shining stars. A bit hard to imagine in one sense the moon which is a lump of rock or something.

Praise Him, praising God. I mean it doesn't voice it articulately. But nonetheless calling inanimate heavenly objects in effect to praise the Lord in their being.

And then in verse 4. Praise Him, you highest heavens. Literally the heaven of heavens. The greatest heaven. As far as you can go in a sense to God's presence. Praise the Lord.

[2 : 23] Praise God. And you waters above the heavens. I remember earlier this year having a few days holiday in China. And going to the old capital of China, Xi'an.

And taking a friend of mine who's a Chinese pastor whom I taught in China a couple of years ago. It was the first time he'd ever been on a plane. And I remember as we flew looking out over the clouds.

He was just amazed by this sort of view. And he'd never envisaged something like this. I'd sort of paid for him to come really. And he said, I feel like I must be very close to God looking out on this. And he was sort of joking. But he was so caught up in amazement at the beautiful sight of clouds and the sun getting very low and so on. Well, there's a long way in a sense to still get to the presence of God.

But this is saying here that the highest of heavens. The clouds that bring the rain. The water above the heavens. The sun, the moon, the stars. Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.

[3 : 24] And so verse 5 brings that to a conclusion. Slightly different language. Rather than simply saying praise the Lord. Let them praise the name of the Lord.

The name of Yahweh is the word Lord in capital letters in the Old Testament. And then comes the reason. So all the things are exhorted to praise God in the heavenly realms.

Let them praise the name of the Lord. And why? For verse 5 goes on to say, he commanded and they were created. The language echoes the first chapter of the Bible.

Genesis chapter 1. There God speaks or commands and it comes into being. He created. Let there be light. There was light. Let there be sun and moon and stars.

In effect is what it later says in Genesis 1. Though it doesn't name them as sun, moon and stars.

And they come into being. What God says happens in Genesis 1. And in effect this psalm is echoing that first chapter of the Bible.

[4 : 27] That God makes at the start light and darkness and dry land and water and the heavenly realms and the earthly realms. And here they are all being summonsed to praise God.

God established them forever and ever. He fixed their bounds which cannot be passed. The language again probably is picking up what God does in Genesis 1 when he creates.

Where God not only just creates but he separates and orders. He separates and orders dry from wet, light from darkness, the earth from the heaven and so on.

And here that's picking up that way. It says he fixed their bounds which cannot be passed. Having exhorted then the heavenly realms to praise the Lord.

The second half of the psalm follows exactly the same pattern but with an earthly echo. Verse 7. Praise the Lord from the earth.

[5 : 27] So verse 1 said praise the Lord from the heavens. Now praise the Lord from the earth as well. And then what follows an exhortation like in the first verses of the things of earth to praise the Lord.

23 things are listed in the verses that follow. From the ocean depths, the sea monsters and all deeps in the second part of verse 7.

So from the highest of heaven to the ocean's depths, praising the Lord. That is, it's encompassing everything that you can imagine in the creation and the universe to praise the Lord.

In verse 8. Fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command. They're all exhorted to praise the Lord as well. It's hard in a sense to imagine.

Well, how does a wind or a storm or a fire praise God? But it's all part of God's creation and is to resound with praises of God back to him.

[6 : 30] Or a story where somebody, a little child was in front of an open fire and was crackling away. And instead of saying the fire is crackling or burning, the little sounds as it spits.

She, I think it was a she, said the fire is clapping. And that might be a way of thinking about a fire. I mean, it's hard to think of it in a bushfire sense. But clapping God, praising God in the sound of a crackling fire.

Then mountains and all hills. They're to praise the Lord. It's hard to imagine Mount Everest jumping up and down and reaching out its arms. But it's using obviously picture language.

And all these things are to praise the Lord. Fruit trees and all cedars. Probably not, you know, it doesn't exclude eucalypts or oak trees.

And that's not the point of it. But in a sense, the domestic trees and the bigger, wilder trees in a way. Like in the next line, wild animals and all cattle. Probably in a sense, poetically, suggesting the wild and the domesticated animals as well.

[7 : 32] The creeping things on the ground and the flying things in the sky. That is in a sense, it's saying everything. Every animal, bird, the fish of the deep back in verse 7.

Everything that God has made is to praise the Lord. And just like in Genesis 1, the pinnacle of creation is the creation of humanity towards the end of Genesis 1.

So here at the end of a long list of things both of heaven and on earth, inanimate and animate, is humanity. In verses 11 and 12.

The kings of the earth. But not just the kings, all peoples. The princes and all rulers of the earth. But also the young men and young women alike.

The old and the young. Male and female, old and young. The rulers and not the rulers. That is, polar opposites in a sense to suggest everybody, without exception, are to praise the Lord.

[8 : 34] Praise the Lord. Notice too that through this psalm, an emphasis on the word all. So we get back in verse 2, all his angels and all his host.

A little bit later, all you shining stars. Then in verse 7, all deeps. And then later, all hills, all cedars, all cattle and finally all peoples.

That is, it's a psalm that is addressing anyone and anything. Indeed, everyone and everything to praise the Lord.

Nobody and nothing is excluded from the address of this psalm. And just like verse 5, after the heavenly things are addressed, says, let them praise the name of the Lord.

So verse 13, after all the earthly things are addressed, says exactly the same line. Let them praise the name of the Lord. And again, like in verse 5, comes a reason.

[9 : 36] For his name alone is exalted. His glory is above earth and heaven. God alone is exalted. The creator of everything.

Sovereign and glorious in power. He alone is to be praised. His glory, in fact, is above earth and heaven.

That is, even the highest of heavens are called to praise the glory of God, which is even higher still. And the things on earth, of course, are to praise a glorious God, who is above earth and heaven. But verse 14 moves on and adds a new dimension of reason to praise the Lord. Not only are we to praise the Lord because of his sovereign glory as the creator of everything, but we're also to praise the Lord because he's acted for his people.

It's summarised in verse 14 that he's raised up a horn for his people. It's an odd image, perhaps, for us, but a horn is frequently used in psalms and other parts of poetry in the Old Testament and also in the New, for example, in the poetry of the book of Revelation.

[10:49] It symbolises strength and refuge, perhaps even a king, a place of safety and power. It is God who's acted for the safety, providing his strength for his people, for all his faithful, verse 14 goes on to say, for the people of Israel who are close to him.

Now think about the juxtaposition of ideas here. It's just spoken about the glory of the Lord being above and beyond the heavens and the earth, and yet the people of God are close to him.

That is, it's summarising, in effect, the benefit of God's action of redemption and salvation. God, who is majestic beyond the heavens and the earth, has drawn people close to him by taking away the barriers between them and him, barriers of sin by atoning for it.

Here's an Old Testament expression of praise. How much more for us when we see so clearly how God has drawn us close to him, that we have confidence to enter his most holy place by means of the death of Jesus Christ.

So the psalm finishes, praise the Lord. It's a very striking psalm. It's not simply saying everything that God has made, praise God, though that's basically what it's saying.

[12:19] But also it's important to bear in mind the context, both in ancient times, but to be honest, also today. People of ancient times as today worship sun and moon and stars.

Today they do it by their devotion to horoscopes and things like that. People sometimes today, and certainly in ancient times, would often worship rulers and kings.

Now maybe that spills over with a bit of American election hype today, but there are still some countries where the kings and rulers are regarded as demigods. Places like North Korea, for example.

Certainly in the ancient world, the pharaoh was regarded as divine, if not semi-divine. And we see today too that maybe we don't worship a bull or a cow or an animal literally.

There's a sense in which many minds are captivated by worshipping nature in a way, or by their worship of science or technology and so on.

[13:25] This psalm is reminding us that despite the beauty, the ingenuity, the glory of the creation and people, it is actually God alone who is to be worshipped and praised.

So that as we see the glory and beauty of what God has made, our thoughts are meant to be drawn up to God and not simply to what we see. You know how often we see a beautiful place and we think, wow, isn't this magnificent, standing over the Grand Canyon or the Great Ocean Road or something like that.

And yet the beauty of that creation is meant to actually lift us to God and say, thank God for all of this. That's what this psalm is reminding us. It's undermining in a sense those who are wanting to worship aspects of the creation rather than the Creator Himself.

And because of the echoes of Genesis 1 through here, it's reminding us that God made it all for His praise and for His glory. That's why we're made in His image, to resound His praises in our lives and for eternity.

The book of Psalms, 150 of them, climaxes with five psalms of praise, of which this is the third, 148.

[14:56] And today we're looking at the last three. All five begin and end the same way. Praise the Lord. And they end the same. Praise the Lord.

Literally, that's one of the most well-known words in our world, a word that actually crosses the barriers of language. Earlier, no, last year, I was preaching at a Pentecostal church in Yangon in Myanmar.

Strange sort of thing to do, to imagine me preaching in a Pentecostal church perhaps, but there I was, being translated by this very diminutive, dynamic female pastor of this church, who subsequently, sadly, has died of cancer.

But as she translated, I couldn't understand a word. I had to simply trust that she was translating me accurately. But I did get a bit puzzled because dotted throughout this sermon was the word, hallelujah.

And I hadn't used the word, hallelujah, certainly not as much as she was using it. And I thought to myself, oh, maybe there's a Burmese word, hallelujah, that's translating something else in my sermon. But no, I knew that wasn't the case.

[16:06] But part of the style of their sermons and preaching and so on was to keep having hallelujah. So I started to throw in a few hallelujahs of my own. The point is, though, that the word hallelujah is known in different languages.

There it is in Burmese. Last month, I was preaching in Ringwood in the afternoon one Sunday at a Burmese church where their language is Chin, Falam Chin, to be precise about its dialect.

And they're the same sort of thing. As they sang their songs, I didn't understand anything in their song, although I recognised the name Jesus as Yezu. But there was an odd hallelujah as well.

I thought, well, I can recognise that bit. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah literally is praise the Lord. The Yah is an abbreviation of the name Yahweh, the Lord.

Praise the Lord. A word that even today is known around the world, a Hebrew word, but meaning the same thing in all sorts of different languages around the place.

[17:09] And that's what these psalms begin and end with, literally, hallelujah. Praise the Lord. Well, Psalm 149, like 148, begins and ends with praise the Lord, hallelujah.

Now the focus of this psalm is particularly on the people of God. It's not a psalm addressing the highest of heights down to ocean depths, but rather exhorting the people of God in particular to praise the Lord.

They're to praise Him as their King, firstly. In verse 1, sing to the Lord a new song, something that probably reflects a victory. That language of sing to the Lord a new song occurs at the beginning of Psalms 96 and 98, as well.

His praise in the assembly of the faithful, that is the gathering of God's people, here, like the end of Psalm 148, are called the faithful. Come back to that in a minute.

Let Israel be glad in its maker. Let the children of Zion, that is another name for the people of Israel, rejoice in their King. God is their maker as a people, not just the maker of the universe, the creator, but he's made them to be a people, by, as we've seen in recent weeks in Exodus, calling them out of Egypt.

[18:24] He's their King, their leader. So let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre. And then comes the reason for this praise, as so often.

For the Lord takes pleasure in his people. It's amazing, isn't it? God takes pleasure in his people. God delights in his people. Of course, not when they turn away from him, not when they're sinful and proud and selfish, but God takes pleasure in his faithful people.

Not just in our words of praise, though he does that too, but in our lives of faithfulness and humility. Because the verse goes on then to say, he adorns the humble with victory.

Now this is probably a psalm written with the context of some battle or victory won. It's acknowledging that the victory has been won by God, not Israel.

[19:32] They would have fought in the battle, but it is God who brings victory, as so often is the case in the Old Testament. He adorns the humble with victory.

Not the proud, not the conceited, but as so often in the Bible, in Mary's song, in Hannah's song in 1 Samuel, in Mary's song in Luke 1, in Peter's first letter, and many other places, in Jesus' own words on several occasions, it's the humble whom God delights in, rejoices or crowns or exalts.

And here is that same idea. That is, there's an implicit exhortation to God's people here, to be humble and faithful.

Not to be boastful or arrogant that we belong to God, not at all. But that we are to be faithful, that is trusting God's promises, and humble, submitting to him as our king, as he's described in verse 2.

So let the faithful, verse 5 says, exult in glory. That's the pivot point of this psalm, the very centre point of the psalm. It's calling God's people faithful, as it does at the beginning in verse 1, and at the end in verse 9, and as Psalm 148 ended as well.

[20:53] God's people are the faithful people, trusting. Now it could be that this psalm is not about a victory past, but actually is an expression of faith and trust in a victory, or maybe the ultimate victory yet to come.

That is, the Bible looks forward to the ultimate victory of God over all his enemies, when they are finally once and for all put down on the day of the Lord's return. And there's a sense perhaps in which that's what this psalm is about, that the faithful people of God are singing the praise of God, now trusting in faith of God's ultimate victory on the final day, that ultimately the enemies will be put down, and God's people and God glorified by all who remain.

So often the psalms are picking up that tension and pressure. There are many psalms that are psalms of lament, that are in a sense lamenting to God, the enemies attacking, surrounding me, overpowering me, etc.

And yet almost without exception, those psalms of lament finish with a statement of faithful praise and confident trust in God. And that's perhaps what this psalm is best describing.

That even though our worlds or our lives are sometimes assaulted by struggles or persecution or enemies, with faith and humility under God our King, we can even then praise God.

[22 : 25] Because we know with certainty, because of the resurrection of Jesus, that on the day of His return, finally all the enemies of God will be put down.

Let's describe that in verses 6 onwards. In Old Testament context, maybe part of the anticipation was we have to actually fight to conquer this land for God or God who will fight for us.

That's certainly not the expectation for Christians. But what it's saying there by saying that the word of the praise is a two-edged sword is this, that on the one hand we praise God for His glory, but in doing that we're expressing our confidence that God is sovereign and His enemies will be defeated. And so the two-edged sword praises God, but implicitly is acknowledging the end of God's enemies. They're being put down and so on.

It's interesting that way back at the beginning of Psalms, Psalm 2, and now we're dealing with the second last Psalm, Psalm 2 talks about the people opposed to God, the kings raging against God.

[23 : 49] And now there's an expression of confident faith that that will end. The victory that these people are either celebrating or anticipating is picked up in the central verse 5 and the beginning of 6.

Let the faithful exult in glory. Let them sing for joy on their couches. Might create an odd picture to sing on your couch, but probably the idea is of a festival dinner, celebrating the victory, where people would not sit at a table like we do, but recline on cushions and couches to eat and celebrate the feast.

And that's probably the victory celebration idea then. And then verse 6 begins, let the high praises of God be in their throats.

What a wonderful expression to reflect upon. The high praises of God. Not simply the praises of God. The high praises of God. That is, it's lifting our sights to the very highest place where God is enthroned and sovereign.

And to that God we praise. Let them be in their throats. Our throats disgorge all sorts of words, not always high praises of God.

[25 : 07] Indeed, even if you can imagine our throats disgorging praises, they're not often directed at God. As I hinted before, we might see a beautiful thing and think, isn't that beautiful?

Or something good might happen to us and we think, oh, I'm very thankful about that. But this is directing our attention, focusing it more sharply. The sticker that you got as you came in today does not say, what are you thankful about today?

I don't especially want to know that. I want to know, what are you thankful to God for today? And there's a difference. We can be thankful for good things, but are we thankful to God?

That I think is what verse 6 is challenging us to think about. The high praises of God being in our throats today and every day.

So that we make sure that we direct our praises or thankfulness, not inwardly or just simply to another person, but that we consciously, deliberately and articulately direct them to God.

[26 : 17] Thank you God for this beautiful thing. Thank you God for this answer to prayer. Thank you God for your glory that is over the heavens and the earth.

The challenge of these psalms, I think, is that it directs or reorients our thinking to be God-centric. So often our whole thinking is self-centric. Even our thankfulness is self-centric. What I've got to benefit from, rather than simply a praise that God is actually the centre of the universe and not me. That's why I think this emphasis in this psalm is about being faithful and humble. That is directing our attention, our focus, our thoughts to Almighty God.

Well finally, the psalms end with a crescendo of praise in Psalm 150. These three psalms, in a sense, remind me of something like Beethoven's Night Symphony, which I'm sure is on your lips all the time.

[27 : 23] And as it builds up really from the first movement all the way to that great choral movement, the Ode to Joy, as it's sometimes called, it's building up through all those movements.

And the whole book of Psalms is a bit like that, building up to this crescendo of praise at the end, which climaxes in this brief, brilliantly brief psalm at the end to crystallise our thinking of praise.

Now we're not getting lots of reasons for praise, but simply exhorting everything to praise God. In a crescendo, the climax, ten times this psalm says, praise the Lord.

And it tells us who we are to praise, why, how, and by whom God is to be praised. Who? The Lord. Yahweh. The covenant name of God.

Not a remote being, but the personal name that God has given his people in the Old Testament.

Praise the Lord. Sing to the Lord a new song. Sorry, wrong song.

[28 : 22] Praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary. Praise him in his mighty ferment. Why are we to praise the Lord? Verse 2, praise him for his mighty deeds.

In the Old Testament, that would be summarising the battles that God wins for his people, bringing them out of Egypt, his promises to Abraham, and so on. Mighty deeds against his enemies. But for us, of course, we have the added dimension that the mightiest deed is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead after his atoning sacrifice on the cross.

The mightiest deed in world history, indeed. Praise him for his mighty deeds and not least for the death and resurrection of Jesus for our salvation.

But notice that verse 2 then says, praise him according to his surpassing greatness. So not simply just for what God has done from which we benefit, but praise him because he is unsurpassingly great.

He is glorious above and beyond the heavens and the earth. Praise him simply because he is so glorious and so great. There's an old prayer of thanks in the prayer book that says in the old language, we give thanks to thee for thy great glory.

[29 : 45] And that's in effect what that second half of verse 2 is encapsulating. Who we're to praise? The Lord. Why? His mighty deeds and his general greatness.

Thirdly, how do we praise him? Now here's the challenge. Praise him with trumpet sounds. We've got a saxophone today that's coming close.

Praise him with lute and harp. Well, that's fairly pleasant and in a way we don't have a lute and harp today. Praise him with tambourine and dance.

Now this is not written for Salvation Armyists either. This is written for all believers. So a bit of dancing in the aisles maybe. Praise him with strings and pipe.

Well, I've got a pipe organ so that perhaps fits that. Now here's the challenge. Praise him with clanging cymbals. Praise him with loud clashing cymbals.

[30 : 44] No restraint. It's not about what music we like. It's about the music that God likes and for some reason unbeknownst to many of us he likes loud clashing cymbals.

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord. That is, who is to praise? Everything that breathes.

Indeed, Psalm 148 was even bigger than that because it's in effect saying, let everything that breathes and everything that doesn't breathe praise the Lord.

Well, here in Psalm 150 it's maybe a bit less poetic. Everything that breathes, not just people but animals, is exhorting everything to praise the Lord.

So often I think our praise of God is a bit like a bonsai. Its roots are a bit shallow, it's trimmed back and restrained in all sorts of ways. Oh, so long as the music's right or the ambience is right or I'm feeling nice or it's not too long or the weather's not too hot or cold, yes, I'm happy to praise the Lord.

That's bonsai praise, very restrained. So is bonsai praise when we frown if somebody around us might lift their hands or jiggle about a bit when the music's on.

[32 : 00] We might walk out if the loud cymbals clash. We grumble if somebody next to us or behind us sings out of key or maybe even if they sing at all. We limit praise to our personal benefits received at God's hands.

That's bonsai praise. It's not what these psalms are on about. Bonsai praise is when we go wow and we marvel at something in the creation, some science or nature or the goodness of another person or an act or something, but we don't actually direct our praise to God.

We say, oh, that's fantastic or this is beautiful or wow, isn't this great that this happened to me. That's bonsai praise. It's not directed to God. And bonsai praise is when we don't simply praise God for his unsurpassing greatness, for his glory that's above the heavens and the earth. the fact that he is sovereign, majestic, faithful and glorious. How self-focused sometimes our minds are.

How often we're constrained by our own self-centeredness really and our praise becomes like a miniature bonsai. Today is Thanksgiving Sunday, not simply to be thankful, thankful, but to thank God.

[33 : 29] And even more than thankfulness for our own pleasure or healing or job or ease or comfort or joy or answer to prayer, they're good things and we'll hear from many about that and that'll be great.

Let's make sure that we follow the direction of these psalms, things that we're thankful in praise for the glory of almighty God. That we are thankful in praise that he is sovereign, incomparable in glory. That we're thankful in praise for the glory of his gospel given to us in Christ. That we're thankful in praise that God sits in heavenly splendor over everything and everyone in this universe.

we give thanks to thee for thy great glory. From the highest of heights to the depths of the sea, the whole of the creation is to sing in joy and praise of God's majesty.

All creatures of our God and King lift up your voice and with us sing, Alleluia, praise the Lord. This psalm is anticipating what heaven will be like.

[34 : 35] So if you don't like this exaltation to exuberant praise then maybe heaven is not your place. John heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them singing to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb.

Be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever. Praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary.

Praise him in his mighty firmament. Praise him for his mighty deeds. Praise him according to his surpassing 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 clanging cymbals. Praise him with loud clashing cymbals. Let everything that breathes praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.