

Everlasting Praise

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. It's nice to be back to be with you here this morning. If you're brand new, you don't know me, my name is Aaron. I'm one of the ministers on staff. I mostly hang out in the evening service there.

I feel like I should tell you that this sermon is, the point of the psalm is fairly straightforward. So this sermon will be shorter than you're used to. Is anyone going to feel ripped off by that?

I said, okay, I could talk really slowly. Plan B is to add lots of adjectives. So you're quite happy with short? Yes, good. You actually seem a little bit too happy about that.

So this is our final week in the series we do most summers looking at the psalms. If you've ever seen a picture of an aircraft carrier, you'll know that they slope up right at the end.

And to provide sort of upward lift for planes when they take off from the deck. And the whole book of psalms is a bit like that. It slopes up at the end in praise to God.

[1 : 11] So the Psalter, the book of psalms, sort of finishes with this great flourish of praise. So Psalms 146, 47, 48, 49, 150 are all praise psalms.

And they all begin and end with the phrase, praise the Lord. So we're going to look at 148. But before we get there, I just want to make a couple of remarks by way of introduction.

First, what is praise? What exactly is praise? It's the Hebrew word halal, which means to boast. To boast. So the word hallelujah, which we say a lot around church circles, hallelujah is halal, boast. Hallelujah, yah, the short form of Yahweh God.

So it's to boast about God. Now when we think of praising God, when we think of this boasting about God like we just did then, we mostly think about singing.

[2 : 15] But singing is just one part of praising God. It certainly includes singing, but it's not just that. Because in our psalm, we have livestock and the moon and mist praising God.

So there must be more to it than singing. Another comment before we get in there. So you heard the psalm read, and you might be thinking to yourself, so why does God need all this praise anyway?

I mean, surely God knows who he is and is secure in that. Why does he keep asking for it? C.S. Lewis wrote a little book called Reflections on the Psalms, and he talks about this.

And he says as a young man, he was quite annoyed at God's persistent demands for praise. What kind of God would incessantly demand that his people tell him how great he is?

He said he used to become really agitated by what he called this persistent eulogy. And why would it agitate him so much? He explains it like this. He says, because we want a God who is man-centered, not a God who is God-centered.

[3 : 30] How can God properly love us if he's just about himself? And he goes on to describe how we arrived at the conclusion that actually praising God is the right thing to do.

It's the best thing to do. And here's his reasoning very quickly. God wants our greatest good. God is the greatest good.

So what would a loving God do? He would point us to him. He would give us himself. So God asking for our praise.

This is not because God is insecure or weak. It's love. It's because he loves us. So when God asks for praise, it's one of the ways he gives himself to us.

I'm going to make now one more teeny tiny point before we get into the psalm. Very quickly. It was tempting to start the sermon by saying, so folks, how's your praise life?

[4 : 33] That would be so mean, wouldn't it? And it would be unhelpful. Because many of us would feel very guilty if I asked you that question.

And you might sort of go away and tell yourself, okay, yes. Yes, he's right. How's my praise life? Oh, it's terrible. I'm going to really knuckle down. I'm going to try a lot harder.

And eventually that sort of attitude leads to despair, I think. So I'm not going to ask you how your praise life is. I think the better way is simply to invite you into the psalm and let it refurbish your imagination.

Just invite you into it and let it refurbish your imagination. So after we've dived into it and we've talked about it, you'll end up saying to yourself, yeah, praise the Lord. So that's what we're going to do.

Okay, we're here now. Let's get into it. Psalm 148. Very, very easily breaks into two halves. One to six and seven to 14. Two stanzas.

[5 : 35] And the very basic flow is one to six is praise from heavenly things. Seven to 14 is praise from earthly things.

So let's start with these heavenly things in one to six. Our psalm begins in the highest of high places and then works its way down and eventually gets to people.

But first begins with those with closest proximity to God. The angels. The angels are called to praise him in verse 2. And then the sun and the moon are called to praise him.

And this phrase would have buzzed in the ears of the early listeners, the first listeners, because, you know, the ancients believed that the moon and the sun and the stars had power over your life to control your life.

And the sun is saying, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. No, these things praise God. I mean, it talks about even the twinkling stars praise God. And verse 4 talks about the waters above the heavens.

[6 : 37] And what's that? In Genesis, if you might remember this, there's this great dividing of the waters. The waters below and the waters above. Just think clouds probably is the best way to think about that.

But they also praise God. And do you see this repetition of the word all? It says all the angels, all of the hosts, all of the shining stars. And if you haven't got the point, it's everything.

Everything. There is no object in the heavens, big or small, which is exempt from giving God praise. But, you say, but, Aaron, how do these things actually praise God?

Because it's saying that they praise God. The moon, for example. You might say to yourself, I don't know much about the moon, but I know that it is nonverbal.

So, how does it praise God? Do we put it down to poetry? I'm not a poet.

[7 : 42] I'm aware there are poets in the congregation. But do we put it down to poetry and say, well, look, it's poetry and it's personifying inanimate things. And you can do that.

It's not really praising God. But it's just kind of, it's just, you know. It's like Milton's Paradise Lost, which I'll read you a quote here. Earth felt the wound and nature from her seat, sighing through all her works, gave sighs of woe.

Is it just, is it not just? Is it something like that? Well, no, I don't think it's poetic license. These things really do praise God. And how do they do that?

The answer is in verse 5. Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created. So, how does the moon praise God?

By the fact that it is there. By the fact that it exists. It boasts about a God who could do something like that.

[8 : 43] Now, the moon landing happened 50 years ago. I love, I love space stuff. I love science fiction. I love the moon landing story. It happened 50 years ago this month.

And did you know, do you guys know what the first meal ever eaten on the moon was? Anyone know? It was communion. It was communion.

The first solid liquid poured was communion wine. The first solid, sorry, the first liquid poured communion wine. The first solid food was communion bread.

And how did it happen? Buzz Aldrin, Christian, an elder in his Presbyterian church. And he wanted to take something really symbolic to the moon. And he talked to his pastor and his pastor said, God reveals himself in everyday things.

So, he took communion with him. God reveals himself in the things he's made. The stuff all around us. The sun and the moon and the stars.

[9 : 44] Their existence tells us something about God. Boasts about God. They boast about God by just being there. That's how they practically, and in a very real way, praise God.

That's the first stanza. Let's move to the second stanza, verses 7 to 14. In verse 1 it says, so in verse 1, praise the Lord from the heavens. In verse 7 and down, praise the Lord from the earth. We actually begin below the earth. We begin below sea level. It says, all creatures, all sea creatures, even the ones in the deep, deep, deep sea, praise God.

Have you ever watched a documentary, The Blue Planet? Any of these documentaries? You're watching this stuff, and I'm watching it. This is incredible. Praise God. That's how it works. These sea creatures, they carry out their mission that God put them there for.

They showcase the immensity of God, the power of God, the creativity of God. And this is followed by the weather, mist, hail, fire, lightning, winds.

[10:54] Then mountains, trees, insects, livestock, birds. It's this breathless list of creation. So the whole thing taken as a whole goes from grubs to lightning to angels.

Everything praises God. We're actually most of the way through the psalm before people show up. Verse 11, starting with kings and queens, regular folks, old, young people.

We praise the Lord too. And I think there's a profound reason why people are mentioned last. When, as Christians, you can feel like, sometimes you can feel like an oddball in society.

A fringy religious group. A group of people that sort of offer the margins there. But the psalms are actually telling us, when we praise God, when we praise God, we are not this little fringy marginal group.

We are joining the stars and the moon and the wind and the whole animal kingdom. We join the entire universe in praising the Lord.

[12:18] So we're not this small minority. And it's such a wonderful idea, isn't it? Psalm 148 is saying to us that there's a soundtrack playing out there, being sung by all of creation.

And if we could still our restlessness for a moment, and we listen to that, we get to sing along. So people have mentioned last, because we're invited into this incredible chorus that all of creation is singing and praising God.

I just think that's wonderful. Now let's zoom in on verse 14 here. Because it gives us the reason that people specifically should praise God.

So creation praises God because it's for its creation. But people have a specific reason to praise God in verse 14. He has raised up a horn for his people.

He's raised up a horn for his people. What on earth does that mean? There's an event called the running of the bulls.

[13:25] Have you guys heard that? Running of the bulls? So it happens this time of the year in a number of places in the world. The most famous places in this town in Spain.

It works like this. The city sections off some streets in a particular town. They release six wild bulls. And then a whole lot of people run out in front of the bulls and try not to die.

So that's the exercise. This is this great cultural thing. I'm not an expert on how to live a wise life.

But that seems like a really stupid activity to participate in. I asked Google. I said, how dangerous is the running of the bulls? And it said, the chance of death is relatively low.

Which is not very reassuring, is it? But for the sake of argument, let's say that you decide to go to Spain and do the running of the bulls.

[14:32] You're running down these cobble streets. And you have a bull charging you. Imagine that. What are you most worried about?

What aspects of the bull would you be most concerned about? It's the horns, isn't it?

It's the horns. And the running of the bulls that just happened like literally a week ago, eight people were gored. There you go. So these horns, they represent something.

They represented something in the ancient Near East. They were the pointy end of a really dangerous animal. So they represented power and strength and victory and overcoming and all of that stuff.

So in ancient culture, horns represented the power and strength of a king. So when the psalmist says God has raised up a horn for his people, the psalmist is saying God has given you a powerful and victorious king who will defeat your enemies.

[15:38] It's going to be a no contest situation. And praise God for that. Now for us living on this side of the incarnation of Christ, of his death and resurrection, we know who this ultimate king is.

It's Jesus. Now you might be thinking, Aaron, you've done that preacher trick where you just make it about Jesus very quickly without explanation. It's a fantastic trick.

But this is what the New Testament writers thought. This is what they believed. Zachariah, when he first saw Jesus in Luke 1.69, hear his words here.

Isn't that great?

So what he's saying is the victory that Jesus offers in terms of salvation is very strong. It's completely triumphant. It's powerful. It's more powerful than the guilt that you carry, that you don't have to carry.

[16:45] It's so powerful. It can take you from eternal death to eternal life. If you have trouble getting your head around that, let me paint a little picture for you.

So there's this thing that separates us from God. It's this desire in our hearts to run our own life. So let's just personify this thing and say that this thing here decides to go to Spain, to Pamplano, I think is the name of the town, and do the running of the bulls.

So this thing that separates us from God, from friendship with God, it decides to do the running of the bulls. And it is sprinting down the street, but takes a wrong turn, ends up in a dead-end street. There's nowhere to come. And around the corner comes six raging 2,000-pound bulls charging at this thing. Who's going to win that situation, right?

My money's on the bulls. Every time. Every single time. Praise God. Right? Praise God.

[17:58] This thing that keeps us from friendship from God, from a relationship with God, God has overcome powerfully and completely.

It is a no-context-contest situation. So the sun and the moon and the stars, they praise God as creator.

And we do the same. But we have more to praise God for. We, his people, have a particular, a peculiar, or a precious praise. And we praise him for redemption.

Folks, that's Psalm 148 for you. Right there. That's the last one of the series in our year. And I want to finish with something for you to consider, just to think about.

A psalm like this. A psalm like this. This is a great one just to sit devotionally for a while with. Because it's a diagnostic psalm.

[19:00] It diagnoses what's happening in our hearts. Because it asks us, what do we actually praise? What do I actually praise?

What do I, what's my life boast? Where do I direct most of my thankfulness?

These are really great questions. And they're great questions because there is a great spiritual danger in not having a life characterized by praise.

So I'll say that again, but positively. If the praise of God doesn't characterize your life, you are in spiritual danger. Why?

Because that makes us very vulnerable. It makes us vulnerable to the siren, voices, promising, happiness, and hundreds of other places.

[19:58] So, praise the Lord. Right? Praise the Lord. He made me. He made you. He made this incredible creation. Praise the Lord.

He redeemed us. He saved us. And praise the Lord for the gift of praise. It is this incredible way God gives himself to us.

And these are wonderful spiritual truths. We should never grow past these very basic things. Let them refurbish your imagination this morning. Amen.