

Abundant Goodness

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 June 2014

Preacher: Rev. James Wagner

[0 : 00] Well, it is the beginning of summer, and so that must mean that this is the final sermon in our series, our series on the Psalms. And I have some proof that summer is close by.

I found these up here. I didn't bring them in this morning. Someone told me they were Dan's sunglasses. But nevertheless, our series on the Psalms ends today, and the title of this sermon is A Good End.

Not only because it's the last sermon before moving on to another one, but today's psalm comes at the end of the Psalter. It is the first psalm of six that share the same theme, and the theme is the end.

Now, the end can mean a couple of things, can't it? It can mean finished or complete or over. After the beginning, the middle, then comes the end, the conclusion, right?

That's what is meant when we think about the location of this psalm at the end of the Psalter, including 145 through 150. The end is the finish line, the last card laid, the final day of work, no more breath.

[1 : 15] And I think Psalms 145 through 150 are also about another end. In fact, the first end may be spelled E-N-D in lowercase letters.

The second end is spelled in capital letters E-N-D. Psalm 145 is also about the point, the purpose, the meaning, the goal, the outcome, the result, what it is that we want at the end.

So not only is this Psalm 145 at the end, but it is about the end. And so what about that end? Let's think about this. The end comes, of course, after all that is gone before, right?

Think of all that's preceded this psalm in the Psalter before we get to Psalm 145. The psalms were written, many of them by David, the sons of Korah, the sons of Asaph, Moses, and others, and some are anonymous.

They are about our terrors and trials and temptations. They are about our difficulties, our despairs, our depressions in life.

[2 : 26] And the psalmists don't, on the one hand, deny the reality of life, but neither, on the other hand, do they dwell in it, though four times they will dwell on it before they move on.

The psalmists don't come out, in the end, as victims, but neither do they come out as victors. They aren't afraid to ask how, and neither are they so perfect that they would never ask why.

The psalmists are not, on the one hand, pessimists, nor, on the other hand, optimists. They are, by and large, realists. And that's what I love about biblical faith and Christian prayer.

There is a realism to the way that we follow Jesus. Following Jesus is a relationship, and a realistic one at that. And so you know the cliché, the adage, you know, that there's the pessimists and the optimists, and there's a glass of water that's filled up to the midpoint, and the optimists say that it's half full, and the pessimists say that it's half empty.

I don't know where you fit in on that, but I see a glass half empty. It's sitting on a table. Well, it's filled up to the, you know, to the midpoint, and I think, is there anyone around here who cleans up after themselves?

[3 : 44] Well, after all the psalmists have said and done, the editor of this book of prayers ends in praise. The end of complaint and lament is praise.

After we've gone through all of that, we come to this praise. And the end of life is praise. In fact, this psalm is an anthology of praise. The title, look with me at it on page 524 if you're not there.

The title, after the one that wasn't in the scriptures, Great is the Lord, is A Song of Praise of David. This is the only psalm that includes in the superscript, in that title, the word praise.

The prayer is 21 verses of praise. It's not situational or circumstantial or incidental. We have no idea when David wrote this psalm.

And I could think of a number of occasions when he might have praised the Lord, when I'm sure that he did praise the Lord. But we have no idea, and it doesn't matter, because all our little ends and big ends end in praise.

[4 : 49] David could have written this at the beginning, the middle, or the end of his life. But in the end, it is all praise. And the prayer is in the form of an acrostic poem.

Now, you know what an acrostic poem is, right? If you don't, take heart. All of your staff on St. John's does. And I was walking down the corridor of our offices last week, and you wouldn't believe what I found on the desk of one of our staff.

And I'll just tell you straight away, it wasn't Lisa Somerville's, and it wasn't Jeremy Graham's, and it wasn't Kristen Moore's, it wasn't even Dan Gifford's, this staff will remain nameless, but look what I found on one of their desks.

I guess you know this book, don't you? You know? Dr. Seuss's ABC's Big A, Little A, What Begins With A? You wouldn't believe what happens when you get to D. Big D, Little D.

Daniel Gifford do-dreamed a dozen donuts and a duck dog, too. No, that's not what it says. But anyway, you know what an acrostic poem is, right? These acrostic poems that are used with our children, they're used to actually teach them the alphabet from A to Z, aren't they?

[5 : 57] And sometimes there are themes, and sometimes there are absolutely no themes. But that's not the case in the Psalms when you have an acrostic poem. No, they're not there to teach ABCs to the children, although maybe they use them, I don't know.

You know, but they're there to teach something else. And so as we saw last week, which was an acrostic poem, and the week before that was an acrostic one, too. But Psalm 25 was to teach God's people the A to Z's, sorry, A to Z's, of what?

Guidance. That's what we learned about last week. And this week, it's teaching the A to Z's, or the Alephs to Tav's, of praise. Look with me at verse 1, from A to Z.

I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless you and praise your name forever and ever. Extol, bless, bless, praise.

That's verse 1 and 2. You go to the end of the Psalm in verse 21, and what do you read? My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever.

[7 : 07] Praise, bless. So, extol, bless, bless, praise. You get to the bottom, bless, praise. It's all about praise from beginning to end, from top to bottom. That's what this Psalm is all about, all 21 verses.

It's an anthology of praise. And why? Why is it about that? Or what does it look like to praise? So, I just want to make three points about praise in this Psalm. And the first one is this.

It's about the praise that the Lord deserves. The Lord is worthy to be praised. That's the point in these first seven verses. It is a synthesis of praise.

It is ascribing worship to the Lord. Praise is a response to the unique value of the Lord. And worship begins with the Lord, revealing himself to us, and then we respond to him in praise.

And all worship isn't equal to praise, but all praise is equal to worship. And that's because there is more to worship than praise, but praise is one feature of worship.

[8 : 08] Worship begins with the Lord, revealing himself to us, something that was concealed before. And once the word has accosted our lives, and we assent to his will, then we adore him in praise.

The act of praise demands a decision. This is the first aspect of the praise that the Lord deserves in this prayer. Notice the decision that the psalmist, that David makes in his praise of the Lord.

In every verse but one, that is verse three, at least once in the verse, uses the word of choice. I will or they shall.

That's a word of decision. Praise is an act of the will. It is the response of the vow. It's actually a response of the vow that the Lord makes to us when he reveals himself and makes promises.

We respond to him by choosing to worship him in praise. The choice is both, you'll notice, individual and corporate. It is both personal and public. The one and ones who worship make the decision to praise the Lord.

[9 : 15] It may come as a habit or become a habit, and there is nothing wrong with habits. But at some point, we do have to decide to praise the Lord. No one makes a person praise.

It can't be done. And that decision isn't passive resignation, but passionate resolution. Praise of the Lord is the decision that we make.

And when we see it that way, it's just reflective of the praise that the Lord deserves. That's the first thing. The second thing to notice about these first seven verses is the duration of praise.

The decision to praise the Lord leads to the question, how long? Sometimes maybe you think that. How much longer do we have to praise the Lord? And an early prayer poses that same question, how long, O Lord?

But in that case, it was about suffering. How long must I suffer, Lord? It's not the case here. The question, though it isn't raised, it is answered. How long? What's the duration of praise?

[10 : 14] Forever and ever and ever. Infinity. Praise is an adventure. It's a journey. It's dynamic. It goes on. It is the unique thing about Christian praise.

And we set limits on praise in our gathering. But there really are no time limits on it with the Lord. Our attention spans are short, but the Lord's isn't.

He'll never question the amount of time that we praise him. We can continue to praise him, and he'll never ask, how long are they going to praise me?

Now, he may question the time, sorry, the temperature, but he will not question the time. He wants it to be red hot or actually cold, but never warm.

He may like that it's really wild or mild, but never medium. He wants our worship in terms of the temperature to be red hot.

[11 : 12] And that, I think, when it's looked after, the time is actually looked after. So how long do we praise him? Well, it says in verse 1 and 2, look for yourself forever and ever, every day, and again for emphasis, forever and ever.

How can that possibly be? Well, look then at the third point in these seven verses. What about the direction and the depth of praise? And I think that's what determines the decision and the duration.

The direction of praise is towards the Lord in verse 3. The one who deserves praise is, as we've already sung this morning, great. And now we live in a world that knows how to praise, I think.

We encourage the praise of our children. We affirm our colleagues. We manage upwards towards those who are our bosses. Our world doesn't lack for people who praise.

The word in praise of is familiar to all of us. And so authorities and experts endorse products, ideas, services, people, books. Think about how much pop figures get paid to put their name on a consumer good.

[12 : 19] Well, the Lord isn't a product, an idea, a service, a book. But he is a person. And in between the decision and after the duration is the direction of our praise.

There it is in verse 3. Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised. That's the direction towards the one who is great. And everyone, don't we all want to be connected with someone, something that is great?

And we want to name things that are great. And so we've named the Great Wall of China, the Great Lakes, the Great Gatsby, the Great Recession, the Great Depression, the Great One.

Oh, who's that? Is that Gretzky? Or is it Alexander the Great or Leo the Great or however many greats there were in the world? Or maybe even here at St. John's after Dan's announcement at the beginning.

We'll have the Great Canadian rip off. If we get enough visitors here some morning and want to fill out the Connect cards. Well, can any of these great things compare with the greatness of our Lord?

[13 : 24] This prayer tells us of our Lord's greatness. And while it wasn't the prayer that inspired the hymn, How Great Thou Art, nevertheless, it does carry the idea and convey the praise deserved by the Lord.

That's why we make the decision. That's why we have the duration. It's because the Lord deserves this praise and because he is the one who is great. The greatness of the Lord matches the depth of his praise.

Verse 3, we read in the second line there, His greatness is unsearchable. And just as there are no limits to the length of praise, there are no limits to the depth of praise.

The praise of the Lord is absolutely, utterly boundless. Just look at the words that are used to describe the praise of the Lord's greatness. Starting in verse 1, it says, I will extol you and bless.

Verse 2, bless and praise. Verse 4, commend and declare. Verse 5, meditate. Verse 6, speak and declare.

[14 : 31] Verse 7, pour forth. Isn't that a great image? And sing aloud. Interestingly to note, isn't it, if you can't imagine yourself singing every day and forever, although I'd be surprised, but nevertheless, only one action of praise is about singing.

There are many other ways to praise the Lord other than singing. Well, these seven verses are about the praise the Lord deserves, and they give us the way to praise the Lord or how to praise the Lord.

But the next six verses are about the promise the Lord declares. These verses give us the reason to praise the Lord. Why praise the Lord? Well, part of the reason is because he struck a covenant with his people, and he keeps his end, there's that word again, of the deal.

He has no intent of breaking this promise. He's reliable. He's trustworthy. He follows through on what he says. And so, why praise him? Why praise the Lord?

Well, look at verses 8 and 9 with me. They're the key to this prayer. They read, That's a promise that the Lord has declared.

[15 : 51] This is the reason that we praise him. And these verses are the meat and the middle and the message of the prayer. Now, if you were to make this prayer into a requiem, these verses would be in the fourth movement.

They would be right in the middle. They would be the best part of it, the centerpiece of the whole production. And in the end, it is the middle that matters the most.

Here lies the heart and the soul of prayer and Christian discipleship. In those two verses, the Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

The end of life is to praise the Lord. But it's the middle that gets you there. Because how you start life makes less difference than your middle and where you end up.

Right? So you can start poorly and end the same. You can start poorly and end well. You can start well in this life and end the same.

[16 : 54] But you can also start well in this life and end poorly. It's the middle that makes the difference. And that's where life is lived and made and forged.

And in the middle is where one stays on track or gets off it. Or if not even on it in the first place, stay off it. But maybe if you're off track, get on.

It's the meat of life. It's the top and bottom, isn't it, that holds the middle together. But if you don't have any meat in the middle, you don't have a sandwich.

Do you? So what is it that makes the biggest difference? I think this prayer tells us our praise, driven by the greatness of the Lord, is so because as the Apostle John tells us in one of his letters, God is love.

Those two verses 8 and 9 are telling us that God is love. Verses 8 and 9, when I originally thought this, I thought it was four parts love, one part anger. The prayer, however, shows that the Lord is essentially one love.

[17 : 59] As David gives us an anthology of praise in 21 verses, here he gives us a short anthology of love in two verses. The Lord is merciful, gracious, steadfast in love.

Another translation says, compassionate, and also slow to anger. What about the last one, you ask? That's essentially love? In other words, the Lord is patient, long-suffering, holds back from blasting evil and sin and the devil.

He waited a couple thousand years, didn't he, before he did that, and sent his son into the world and definitively defeated sin, evil, and the devil as his anger and his wrath was pointed directly towards his son on the cross.

The Lord's anger was directed at Jesus and he bore the anger of God, the wrath of the Lord, but the Lord was slow in doing it. It wasn't in a fit of fury.

It wasn't a flying rage. It wasn't throwing some kind of tantrum. Now, I think the Near Eastern religions, that's what those gods did, but not Yahweh, not the great I am.

[19 : 13] Here in verses 8 and 9 is the Lord's promise to Moses and it comes from Exodus, chapter 34, verse 6. And here it is in David's mind. And David is showing us how to praise the Lord, I think as he meditates on the love of the Lord.

Back in verse 5, he says, I will meditate on your wonderful works. And so he has. He's meditated on the works of the Lord. He's meditated on the word of the Lord. And this is how it's come out in the praise of the Lord in all 21 of these verses.

And David didn't invent this idea about God. He didn't kind of dream it up on his own. God is merciful and gracious, abounding in love and slow in anger. It was passed on to him through his religious tradition.

This came to him in the same way that the gospel in many respects came to Paul. Remember Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, he says this. He says, I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures and that he was buried and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.

David must have read this in the book of Exodus by Moses. And this for David is his gospel just like what I just quoted is the gospel for Paul.

[20 : 40] Jesus is dying and rising and ascending is the gospel for Paul. The gospel for David is this love and mercy, steadfastness and long-suffering.

David meditated on these words and he prayed them improvisatorily. I just made that word up. David's prayer is to the words of the Lord revealed to Moses what jazz is to music.

After memorizing and mulling over the love of the Lord, David improvised them into this prayer. And that's what the church has done for ages and ages and ages.

Mulling over these words, meditating on them, memorizing them. Listen to what Isaac Watts put together on these few verses in a couple of different hymns.

One hymn was called Sweet is the Memory of Thy Grace and on these two verses he has these four lines. How kind are thy compassions, Lord! How slow thine anger moves!

[21 : 40] Soon he sends his pardoning word to cheer the souls he loves. It wasn't enough for him to write one hymn on this psalm, so he wrote a second one.

This one called My God, My King, Thy various praise. Thy truth and justice I'll proclaim. Thy bounty flows in endless stream.

Thy mercy swift, thine anger slow, but dreadful to the stubborn foe. This is his promise declared and prayed after the fruit of David's meditation.

David is reminding us in the end the purpose, our goal, is to praise the Lord. The praise of the Lord leads to the love of the Lord and I think this is a little bit different than what happens in our culture.

We think that we praise that which we love, but I think David is showing us that we love that which we praise. So he praises the Lord and as he praises the Lord who's revealed himself as the one who loves him, then he loves the Lord, which continues on then with praise and love.

[22 : 50] But starting with God revealing himself, he praises and then loves the Lord. Well, this is the end of praise then. And that's what Moses learned on Mount Sinai and it's what David expressed in this prayer.

Why do we praise the Lord? We praise the Lord because he declared his promise to Moses through David in Jesus whose love is completely unique and supreme.

In the final eight verses, we'll learn more specifically the provision that the Lord displays. And so we've learned how we praise the Lord, why we praise the Lord, and now something else.

And that is that the way the Lord preserves us and how he displays that. There's two things to say about this and the first one is this, that the Lord preserves us, which is why we praise him, in many ways.

There's one word that describes these concrete examples, these very practical examples that David gives when he prays and it's preservation. Through the prayer, throughout the prayer, he says in a number of ways over and over again how he preserves us.

[23 : 56] Look with me at them, starting in verse 14. The Lord upholds and raises up. Verse 15, he gives. 16, opens his hand, satisfies the desires.

17, is righteous and kind. 18, I love this one, is near. I mean, we think of the Lord Jesus coming near to us, the word of God made flesh and dwelt among us.

and in that very personal way, but still in this way, the Lord is near to his people, says David. 19, fulfills the desires and hears and saves.

In verse 20, he preserves. And then finally, but destroys the wicked. This is how the Lord preserves his people. In verses 14 to 20, we see how the Lord loves his people and administers his kingdom.

And just as there are many words to describe how his people praise the Lord, there are as many ways to describe how the Lord preserves his people. Which is reason for praise.

[25 : 04] And this is something the Lord does himself. The Lord is near to all who call on him in truth. It's not near to just anyone, but to those who really seek the truth, who long for the truth, who for truth makes a difference.

He's near to them. And so we see that the cohesion between the Lord and his subjects are very close for those who are near to him and seeking after truth.

The Lord wants to get up close. He wants to be personal. And we saw last week in Psalm 25, right? That the Lord guides personally. Well, he personally hears the call of anyone who calls upon him in truth.

The Lord seeks those to worship him in spirit and truth, as John says in his gospel. That's the first thing. The second thing here, then, is that this preservation of the Lord is just a little bit haunting, don't you think?

Maybe you're wondering, asking, well, why not all the people? Is it just for the Jews? Well, we look at all the times in this passage that he says, all and every.

[26 : 11] It's pretty comprehensive. It's pretty collective. And David isn't exaggerating here, is he? He, of all people, wouldn't do that to people. He wouldn't make a promise just to get people's hopes up and then only dash them.

He knew his limitations as a king, right? With a small K. But however, David is praising the king as he starts out this song, my lord.

It doesn't say my king after this. It says my lord, the king. Capital K. Right? Now, David could say everything in these eight ending verses about himself, that this is what the Lord had done for him.

And because he could say that, I think he could say that it wasn't just for him, though. That if he could do it for David and all that he had done, all his sin and all of his dysfunction, that surely God could do it for anyone and everyone.

And so all those who call him in truth is good. Those who fear him know that he is great. And those who love him know that they were first loved by him. This may come as something as a surprise to you, but listen to what one commenter said about this.

[27 : 20] Just about the Lord's fear and love and greatness brought together. They seem like they can't be held together at all, can they? But fear and love in particular are the inseparable elements of true religion.

Fear preserves love from degrading into presumptuous familiarity. love prevents fear from becoming a servile and cringing dread.

Read that again. Fear and love are the inseparable elements of true religion. Fear preserves love from degenerating into presumptuous familiarity. Love presents fear from becoming a servile and cringing dread.

We don't earn this kind of preservation of the Lord, but it requires some effort of response on our part. So as Paul says, we're not saved by our works, but by the works of the Lord so that we might fulfill the works that he's prepared in advance for us.

And so the Lord's provision is comprehensive. It's complete. And therefore, it's not surprising how this prayer ends, is it? Look with me at it. It ends in praise with every creature praising the Lord forever.

[28 : 35] The prayer ends right where it began and from end back to the beginning and beginning to the end. Our end is, our goal is, our purpose is to extol, to bless, to praise the Lord.

Well, in the end, a good end, let me just share, suggest a few things with you. The first is this. Let us praise the Lord in G major.

Thinking about the jazz thing, theme, and meditating on the words of the Lord, right? And what jazz is, which is improvising on themes, right?

Here are four great themes to think about, to improvise on. Verse three, that the Lord is great. Verse five, he's glorious. Verse seven, he's good.

And verse eight, he's gracious. I'm not making it up, it's actually in there. Our key in life is to improvise on these G's, the greatness, gloriousness, goodness, and graciousness of the Lord.

[29 : 48] Lord, I would ask some of you, do you meditate? Most of you would probably say no. Some of you might even actually cringe. We think of meditation maybe in terms of Eastern, Eastern ways, where one's life is empty, but Christian meditation is filling yourself.

Not filling yourself, but being actually filled by the word of the Lord. And meditating, mulling over, improvising on that. We all have some jazz actually in our life where we need a little bit.

So this kind of praise actually is offered up unto the Lord. Praising the Lord in the key of G major. And finally, let me, I'll leave you with this.

Let me encourage you not to think of what spheres you'll actually praise the Lord. Obviously, when we come here, we praise the Lord, don't we? But our whole life is offered up to the Lord in praise of him.

And when we're together with those who are followers of Jesus, it's called discipleship. But we should praise throughout all of our life and so that when we're with those who are not following Jesus, it's just called evangelism.

[30 : 57] Praise from beginning to end all the time, everywhere. Not only with our lips as we pray in the great thanksgiving, but also with our lives. We praise the Lord from beginning to end.

Let's pray. Let's pray.