

Psalm 148

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Preacher: Canon David Short

- [0 : 0 0] O God, who made all things, we ask now as we turn to you that you would draw close to us and that we would be able to draw close to you so that we might set our hearts on you and treasure you above all things.
- We ask this in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Now, if you would take your service sheet and turn back to Psalm 148 on page 4 and 5, I think you'll find that helpful.
- There's something slightly disconcerting about being told the same thing, exactly the same thing 12 times as Psalm 148 does for us.
- You know this was written late by Bach in his time at Leipzig and the words and the music of this cantata are shaped around Psalm 148.
- The aria Charlene sang for us, the first aria, quotes from Psalm 148 and the whole thing is infused with this spirit of praise.
- [1 : 1 6] But still it is disconcerting, isn't it, to be confronted 12 times by the same command in this Psalm, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, praise the Lord.
- And I just tell you that you sang that 55 times in that hymn. Anyone would think we might need some help in this area.
- Now, we have just come through thanksgiving and most of us will have gathered with friends and family and had a meal and some of us may have given thanks to God for his goodness and his kindness to us.
- But that's not praise. Praise and thanksgiving are two different things. Thanksgiving is when someone does something for you which is good and kind and you say to them, thank you.
- But praise goes further, it takes it another step. Praise is when you go to that person and you say, you are wonderful, you are amazing, you are brilliant. And when the Psalm comes to us and says 12 times, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, it's not because the Bible is interested in mindless chanting, the sort of biblical equivalent of cheerleading.
- [2 : 3 0] No, no, this Psalm is a spiritual diagnostic and it helps us to see our true spiritual condition.
- It would be like going to a doctor and saying to the doctor, doctor, I'm tired, I find it hard to get up in the morning. I'm not talking about myself, this is just an illustration.
- I'm overworked, nobody understands me. And she says to you, well, what are you eating? How are you sleeping? Are you doing any exercise?
- And you say to her, look, just give me a pill and send me away. She says, no, no, answer my questions. And the Psalm comes to us and is a diagnosis of what is most important to us, where we are looking for meaning.
- Because, you see, these things can be diagnosed from where we direct our praise. And most of us are desperately looking for something to celebrate, something to sing about.

[3 : 32] We want to be happy. We want to avoid that creeping cynicism which seems to be so much the part of living here on the West Coast. And Psalm 148 says to us, there is a soundtrack out there, one main song being sung in many different ways by all the creation, and it says, if you stop long enough and if you steal your restlessness, you might just hear it and you might just be able to sing along with it.

Now, I say that because there's nothing particularly religious or churchy about praise. Our lives are full of praise. Our world is full of praise.

And for proof, I read the Vancouver Sun yesterday. So if you turn to the wine column in the Vancouver Sun, which my wife did and handed it to me, let me read to you from that column about a particular wine.

Always a silky, smoky, black cherry, exotic, orange peel affair with compost and strawberry rhubarb pie flavours. Who's been eating compost?

That's it. But you see, it's the language of praise, isn't it? Here is a downtown apartment for sale. There is something uniquely extravagant about living in a state-of-the-art, impeccably designed home in the very heart of the best city in the world.

[5 : 06] Here is another one. Dazzling, exciting, delightfully cosmopolitan, deliciously exquisite and decidedly exclusive. It's an apartment.

But it's the language of praise. In the travel section, Hong Kong, and I quote, is a place of superlatives. What is there not to love? It's brash, bold, vibrant, eclectic, unpredictable, not to mention a world-class shopping destination.

And one more from the movies. This is a quote. From seductive start to shattering finish, the film is as stunning, entertaining and steadfastly thrilling as it is beautiful.

It's the language of praise. And just a superficial reading of a Vancouver Sun finds readers praising books, people praising cards, people praising other people, people praising presentations and performances and music and even politicians.

And have you noticed that those people whose lives are filled with praise are just a lot nicer to be with? And I think this is where the psalm is like a diagnostic.

[6 : 16] It asks us, what is the centre of your praise? Now this last week, a well-known television host in Berlin was fired for praising Hitler and the values of the Nazi party.

It's still a taboo subject in Germany and she was sacked because she praised the wrong thing. So one of the most revealing things about us is what we praise.

The Bible is not interested in praise for its own sake, like a kind of spiritual flossing. Jesus has some very harsh things to say about those who just repeat things like a mantra.

No, no, no. True praise reveals what we truly value. The more precious something is to us, the more delight we take in it and the more natural the praise of it.

And so the psalm asks us two questions which go to the heart of who we are and the heart of the issue. And the first is this, who were you made by?

[7 : 20] Just look at verses 2 to 6. Praise him, all his angels. Praise him, all his hosts. Praise him, sun and moon. Praise him, all you shining stars.

Praise him, you highest heaven and you waters above the heavens. Let them praise the name of the Lord. For he commanded, they were created. He established them forever and ever. He fixed their bounds which cannot be passed.

Here is a cosmic congregation. If you read through all the psalm, it's like an ancient Near Eastern Wikipedia. Cosmology, marine biology, meteorology, geomorphology, dendrology, which is trees, zoology, ornithology, which is birds, political geography, sociology, anthropology.

It's saying that there is a silent song of praise going on all around us all the time. It's humble and it's beautiful and again if we could just still our restlessness for a moment, we might be able to tune our hearts and hear it.

One of the earlier psalms says this, the heavens are telling the glory of God. The firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech.

[8 : 35] Night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech. There are no words. Yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world.

Now how do they sing? And the answer is by the very fact that they are there. When the earth does its round and night turns to day and the sun looks to us as though it rises, it does so at God's command.

And when the night comes and you can see the stars when it's not so cloudy, which are millions and millions of miles away, they are singing a song of praise to God. And do you know what they sing?

They sing glory to God in the highest. Here we are. How do you think we got here? Do you think we put ourselves here? This is what they're singing. How do you think we sparkle and shine?

Who made us? The Lord made us. The same Lord who made you. Praise him. He's fantastic. That's what they're singing. And this is what Bach was trying to do with his music.

[9 : 41] I read a wonderful story about Bach this year. When he was 10 years old, he was shipped off to stay with his older brother, Christoph. And Christoph was learning music from the famous composer Pucklebell, whose one piece you can hear in every mall everywhere in the world.

Anyway, Pucklebell gave to Christoph a collection of music, which he brought home and hid in a locked cabinet. And the 10-year-old Johan used to sneak out at night and he could get his hand through the bars of the cabinet, roll the book of music up, and he would sit there by moonlight and copy this music out.

Bach believed, along with his contemporaries, that the shape of the music echoed something of the harmonies sung by the created order. And that the composer's job was to replicate in earthly terms these celestial harmonies by codes and principles and different methods.

That's why he stayed up at night as a child. He wanted to learn the fabric of counterpoint to reflect the music of God's praise. He wanted to compose music that would harmonise with the praise of God.

And you know, Albert Schweitzer noticed for the first time that Bach has embedded in his music certain figures that have no relation to the music but seem to have been taken from spoken language.

[11 : 18] For example, the scales, the rippling scales and the prelude from heaven came the host of angels. It's not just an ornamental flourish. It's meant to show us the angels on the stairs.

Or the dissonance in, Jesus, you my joy, it evokes the kind of disquiet that the sinful person has knowing that Christ has forgiven them. Or the prelude to, with peace and joy I now depart, the rising base figures depict the soul's ascent to heaven.

Bach is trying to represent what the psalm is telling us more obviously, that the physical universe is an orchestra or a choir and the words and the music and the intent of the music and of all creation is, praise the Lord.

And the basis of their praise is simply this, they did not make themselves. He commanded, He established, He fixed. And for that God alone is worthy of all praise.

It's very helpful, isn't it? And sometimes when you watch television, you'll see a commercial for something and at the end it'll say, isn't Mother Nature marvellous? Well, you see, this creation is not eternal and dependent on Mother Nature.

[12 : 40] Every part of it sprang from the command of God. And we live in a day when there are conflicting world views about the physical creation. In the ancient days, people believed that winds blew because spirits were involved and that rain came because a God was angry.

These days, the physical world has no intention whatsoever. Although Einstein did describe gravity as spooky things happening at a distance, didn't he? The point that the psalm is making is that there is intention in the physical world.

It pulsates with praise for the God who created all things. There is nothing and there is no one who does not owe God worship. And the fact that we were made by him alone were to make us bow before him.

the sheer fact of our existence or to make us either fall on our faces or to leap up and make a big noise in praise.

And I point out at this point, have you ever noticed how un-Anglican the psalms are? There's a lot of noise and dancing, which is a little bit too much, really, for our delicate Anglican ears.

[14 : 04] The point is this. Our deficit in praise to God is a perfect diagnostic of how we've closed our ears to the world around us and of how far our hearts have moved away from God.

This is the first question asked by the psalm. Who were you made by? Have you ever stopped and just been amazed by the fact that you exist?

Have you ever stopped and asked the question, why am I here? And then said to God, thank you, I praise you. That's the first question. The second is this.

Who were you made for? And if you turn over to the second half of the psalm, you can see that humanity doesn't even get a mention until verse 11. Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth, young men and maidens together, old men and children, let them praise the name of the Lord.

Here is the basis of human unity and human dignity. Our unity as humans does not come from race or colour or language.

[15 : 16] It does not come from our religious preferences or from our social background. It doesn't even come from our DNA. Our true unity comes from the fact that we were made by God and we were made for God.

And all the great divisions in humanity and all the great separations in humanity collapse before that. The true bond between royalty and servants, between old people and young people, between those who are privileged and those who are disadvantaged, is this.

We were made by God for friendship with Him. And when someone discovers that for the first time or for the thousandth time, they are lit up with praise.

In just the same way, our human dignity does not come from our achievements, it does not come from our biology, it doesn't come from our potential, but it comes from the fact that God has made us to be His image, to reflect what He is like to each other and to be joined to Him in friendship.

So you see, if the sun and the moon have good reason to praise God, we have more. If we see the power of God at work in creation, we see the love and power of God at work in salvation.

[16 : 38] And that is why we praise the name of the Lord. We'd never know the name of the Lord unless He revealed it. And the reason He's revealed it is so that we might be friends. And that is why verse 14 says what it says.

He has raised up a horn for His people, praise for all His saints, for the people of Israel who are near to Him.

The horn is not part of the orchestra. It is not the horn, a foghorn on a boat. The horn is the front end of an animal, the pointy end, the business end, if you like.

If a bull is charging towards you with 2,000 pounds behind him, the point at which that all comes to bear upon you is the horn.

And that is why it is a symbol of great strength. And when we open the New Testament, we discover that this horn is a person. It's the person, Jesus Christ.

[17 : 45] God has raised up a horn of salvation for us. And the most wonderful and the startling miracle in this psalm is that the role of the horn is to bring His people, to bring God's people near to Him.

That is what Jesus did. The God who is above the heavens, the God who created everything, entered His creation, was incarnate within His creation in the form of His Son, a fragile human baby.

When He was born, the angels couldn't contain themselves and they pulled aside the curtain and they sang praise, glory to God in the highest and peace with all whom God is pleased.

And the reason that Jesus came was to draw us back, to draw us near to Him. I don't know if you've read His parables, but in His teaching, Jesus pictures us as lost sheep, lost coins, lost children, lost children, deeply precious to God, objects of His love, who take His gifts and walk away from Him.

And Jesus Christ has come to draw us back to Him and God wishes to pour blessing into our hearts, but our hands are so tightly gripped around our trivial treasures that they're not open enough to be able to receive His goodness.

[19 : 09] And on the cross, Jesus reaches out to every person who has walked away and is running away from God, every person who has never been grateful to Him, every person who's never given praise to God.

And He places us on His shoulders and He draws us back home, back to be near God, back to be with Him forever. And three days later, after He was killed, He rose again from the dead and the angels couldn't restrain themselves again and made an appearance at the tomb to show that God wanted to draw us back into His embrace.

While we were far off, holding on to all that was trivial, God sent His Son. That's why we meet this morning.

We don't praise God because it's good for us. We don't do it because we need to. We don't do it because somehow God needs it. We do it because we are facing reality.

And when we start to understand what it's really all about, we cannot help but praise Him. And I think living here in Vancouver, we have so little excuse not to be grateful to God.

[20 : 23] We're surrounded by mountains that lift their voices in praise to God. The sea roars, the forest claps their hands, and more than anything, we know something of what it cost God to draw us near to Himself.

How He became one of us. How He died in our place. How He rose to free us from death. How He will come and take us to be with Him in glory where we will enjoy His presence face to face and His friendship forever.

And so we're now going to return to the cantata and as you listen to this next aria, let us pray that with God opens our eyes to the wonder of His love and bow your hearts to Him and learn the song of praise, become like a child and draw near to Him by faith.

Amen.