

What Does it Mean to Praise?

A Look at Psalm 150

By W. Robert Godfrey

Some weeks ago I attended a worship service in another state. While I was reading through the bulletin and looking at the order of worship, I was surprised to see a section of the service that had just the heading "P&W." I knew that I was getting old and was out of touch, but I was a little bit surprised at this: I thought I was well informed in liturgics. I thought I knew something about the traditional liturgical forms. So I wondered, "What is P&W?" I racked my brain for various appropriate Latin phrases but none seemed to work out. When we finally got to P&W in the service, I discovered that it stood for "Praise and Worship." Now probably most of you who have been around already knew that. But I was surprised. I had not heard that abbreviation and was not entirely familiar with that phrase. But it did remind me that in many of the churches I visit the opening section of the service is given over entirely to what are usually called praise songs and this section of the service is often called the "worship" part of the service.

Such language troubles me. As a preacher, I like to think that my preaching is also part of the worship. It is distressing to think that when the people stop singing and I stand up to preach, the worship is over. This new use of language led me to further reflection on what we mean today by worship and perhaps, in a more focused way, on what we mean by praise.

The use of praise songs has circulated far and wide in our time and become very popular. Initially, when I first heard of their use, I thought such songs must all be psalms since the Book of Psalms is called, in Hebrew, the Book of Praises. But I soon discovered that these praise songs are not exclusively psalms.

In discussions on the subject of praise, people frequently appeal to Psalm 150 as if it gives a blank check for virtually any kind of activity to be offered as praise to God, since it seems to gather together all sorts of praise activities--and not incidentally that little phrase, "praise him with dancing." Is it providing a carte blanche for our liturgics? What is it really teaching us about praise?

How does the Lord want us to praise him? What is the character of our praise? What should be the character of our praise? And, most importantly, of course, what does the Bible itself say about our praise? Since we, as Reformed people, have always insisted that we must worship God as he wants to be worshiped, so we must certainly praise God as he wants to be praised. Therefore, the only way we can answer these questions is by looking into his Word and taking a special look at this important, often-quoted psalm, the culminating psalm of the Psalter.

Psalm 150 on Worship

Certainly Psalm 150 is very much concerned with the praise of the Lord. Its recurring

refrain, "Praise the Lord," appears thirteen times. And its call to praise is an appropriate culmination to this book of praises.

Some observers of the Psalter have noted the careful way the Book of Psalms as a whole has been put together. In the early section of the psalms there are many psalms of lament. Many psalms reflect on the difficulty of the human condition and the sadness that can easily come into human life. But as you move toward the end of the Psalter, there is a growing chorus of psalms of praise and of delight and joy reaching its crescendo in Psalm 150, which is purely a psalm of praise. These observers suggest that the Psalter is perhaps put together in a way to reflect the pattern of the life of believers as we pass from suffering into glory. Therefore, Psalm 150 then is, in a sense, the culmination of the glory, the hope, the praise that is to be ours as the people of God. It is good, then, to look at this psalm, this key psalm, and to ask, "What does it say about praising God?" "How does it direct us in praise?" I would suggest that this psalm is comprehensive in its direction of praise because it talks about the where, the why, the how, and the who of praise, just as if the psalmist had been a good journalist.

The "Where" of Praise

Where are we to praise the Lord? The psalmist instructs us in the second part of verse 1, "praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens." The psalmist declares first of all, that we must praise God in his temple, his holy place. We must praise him, that is, with the focused communal character of our worship. We must be a worshipping people. We must be a people who gather to praise God and to worship him. That is a teaching of the New Testament. Hebrews 10:25 says, "Neglect not the assembling together of yourselves as is the habit of some." It is easy to think that we can worship and praise God just anywhere, concluding that we do not have to come together as his people—we can stay home and praise him. But the psalmist makes the point that communal worship is central. Communal worship is necessary. Communal worship is important for the people of God. We need to come together. We need to focus on God.

You may have friends who talk about worshipping God on the golf course. I think that is a good idea, if it is possible. We have a number of golfers at Westminster Theological Seminary and I hope they are able to worship God on the golf course. But I have heard that sometimes on the golf course people have thoughts in their minds other than of praising the Lord. Sometimes there are distractions on the golf course. I have learned that sometimes there are temptations on the golf course to think of things other than the Lord. And so the Lord, knowing our human frailties, knowing our easy distraction, and knowing that some of you are golfers, says to us that we need to have times together praising him in his sanctuary, praising him with his people.

The Psalm also declares: "Praise him in his mighty heavens." I think that this phrase does call us to praise him in all of creation. Praise him wherever you are. Praise him at all times and in all places, including the golf course. The psalmist, in the first verse, speaks not only about our gathered, focused worship as a community, but also about all the moments of our lives. We are always to be praising the Lord. Our lives are to be—as much as we are able—filled with praise. We are not to be just "Sunday" Christians, as we gather Sunday morning and Sunday evening, but praise is to characterize us at every moment wherever we are. And that, of course, has a very solid, Reformed ring to it. All of our lives are to be lived for God, whether we

are at school, at work, or at home. These are not places away from the Lord. These are not places where we are not serving the Lord. But all of these areas of life are to be places where we glorify him.

So, where do we praise the Lord? We praise him everywhere. And we praise him with focused devotion when we gather together as his people.

The "Why" of Praise

Why do we praise the Lord? Verse 2 talks about that. We praise the Lord for what he has done and for who he is. We praise him for his "acts of power" and we praise him for his "surpassing greatness."

We praise him for what he has done. When we reflect on the Lord, when we lift our voices in praise, our songs of praise are to be filled with the acknowledgment of the activity of God. God is our creator. God is our judge. God is our sustainer. God is our redeemer. We are to think about the things that God has done, the things that God is doing, and the things that God will do for us. We should raise our voices in praise because of all the wonderful things that he has done for us.

But even more, it seems to me that this psalm encourages us to recognize that we are to praise him for who he is. We praise him for his "surpassing greatness." Now, in human relationships, we all like to be appreciated for the things we have done. I think parents like to think that their children occasionally pause to be thankful. In friendships we are glad when something we have done that is special is acknowledged and appreciated. That is important. But isn't it also true that in human relationships there are times when we would like to be loved just for who we are?

The Lord says to us that this attitude should at points characterize our relationship with him, too. We should love him for his own sake. We should love him for his surpassing greatness--just for who he is. And sometimes that is hard. It so easily becomes characteristic of us to think only of what God has done and that to thank him for that. But we should also thank him for who he is, for his greatness, for his goodness, for his love, for his faithfulness. We should meditate not only, then, on what he has done but on who he is. "Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise" (Ps 145:3).

The "How" of Praise

Here we come to the section of the psalm that occupies about half of it, and where we are told to praise God in a great variety of musical ways: "Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals."

I suspect that if you had been asked to make a list of how we should praise the Lord, you would have written more about song and prayer. So why, then, does the psalmist at this point talk not about words of praise, but rather primarily about sounds of praise lifted to the Lord? Why does he marshal these musical instruments: strings and percussion and wind instruments--just about the whole range of instruments in ancient Israel? Why does he want us to focus on these sounds of praise raised to the Lord?

We should not look at these instruments as abstractions, as instruments without any background, history, or character to them. Nor should we read this psalm as saying, "If we really want to worship God, we must have a trumpet, a tambourine, and cymbals ." No, I suspect that as the pious Israelite heard this psalm read he would have thought very much of the occasions on which these instruments were used in the history of God's people. These instruments are so richly attached to crucial experiences in Israel's worship and national life that as the people of God read or sang this psalm, their minds would have gone back to those events.

Think of the trumpets: The pious Israelites would surely have thought of the various solemn religious occasions--the offering of sacrifices at the temple, the Day of Atonement, the great moment of victory when the Ark was taken up to Jerusalem--at which the trumpet was sounded (see Nm 10:10, Lv 25:9, and 2 Sm 6:15). The psalmist's call to praise God with the trumpet would have reminded the people of those powerful acts of the Lord and the greatness of the Lord. They remembered that the trumpet was used to summon them together both for worship and civic meetings (see Nm 10:4). It would have reminded them how they were summoned to go into battle for the Lord against the enemies of the Lord and to preserve their nation. They would have remembered how the trumpet was sounded at the anointing of their kings (see Joshua 6 and Judges 7). This instrument, you see, would have carried their minds back to all sorts of occasions in which they praised the Lord. Praise him in his temple. Praise him under his heavens in all that you do.

Think of the harp and the lyre. These instruments of rejoicing (Gn 31:27) were played at the dedication of the temple, played at the dedication of the new walls of Jerusalem, played sometimes to accompany prophecy and sacrifices, and played to celebrate victory in battle (see 2 Chr 5:12, Neh 12:27, 1 Sm 10:5, 1 Chr 25:1-6, 2 Chr 29:25, 20:28). Again we see the richness of the historical background of these instruments for Israel. They produced not just sounds to praise the Lord, but sounds resounding with the religious, national, and military history of God's people. All that they did in service to him was recalled in their praise.

"Praise him with the tambourine and dance." Here again we have instruments that are particularly used as expressions of joy. Dancing is contrasted regularly in the Scripture with mourning. In the book of Ecclesiastes, there is a time to mourn and there is a time to dance (Eccl 3:4). Dance and the tambourine especially recognized those times of happiness, those times of celebrations, those times preeminently of triumph (see Ps 30:11 and Jer 31:4,13). For in Israel the tambourine and dance were brought out to celebrate military victory. Thus we find Miriam dancing and leading the women of Israel in dance and playing the tambourine as they celebrated the drowning of Pharaoh in the Red Sea and the deliverance of the Israelites (Ex 15:20). We find repeated references to how the women danced to celebrate the victories of Saul and David over the enemies of God (see 1 Sm 18:6, 21:11, 29:5). We also find dancing at times of the harvest celebration (see Judges 21:21). The dance is not particularly recorded in Scriptures as used for worship in Israel except at that tragic moment when all of Israel danced before the golden calf (Ex 32:19). But in the worship of Jehovah we find no instances of dancing as a regular part of the worship of God.

There is one possible exception to this pattern. In 2 Samuel 6:14 we are told that David "danced before the Lord with all his might" as the Ark was being taken up to

Jerusalem. And you remember that his wife, Saul's daughter, criticized him for that dance and the Lord cursed her for her criticism.

This event is interesting because the Scripture says that David danced naked before the Ark. This might raise the question whether the only legitimate kind of liturgical dancing we find in Scripture is naked dancing. Certainly this conclusion would pose even more problems than we have had thus far in our study of worship together. What is really going on in this story of David dancing before the Ark? It seems to me that when the Scripture says that David was naked, it does not mean that he was bare. It means that he had put aside his royal robes and insignia. He had put aside the royal vestments that the king ordinarily wore in a triumphal moment. He had divested himself and had humbled himself before the people and before the Lord. In that sense he was naked of the signs of his office. (I hope my understanding is not just a Victorian, prudish reading of the text, but the most probable, since nakedness was not a frequent occurrence in Israel.) What David's wife criticized was that he took upon himself this humble role. He did not measure up to her image of a king and soldier when he joined with the women, removing his royal insignia, dancing before the Ark. But he gave proper glory to God in this celebration of the great victory that the Lord had given the people of God in conquering the city of Jerusalem. He did not claim glory for himself. He celebrated his joy humbly in this triumphant moment of the people's existence. So David danced preeminently as a celebration of this victory that the Lord, his great God, had given to his people.

The strings and the pipes recorded here in Psalm 150 (or the strings and the flutes as the NIV has it) are also general terms for instruments of rejoicing. Cymbals are associated with the moving of the ark and with the sacrifices in the temple (see 2 Sm 6:5, 2 Chr 29:25). So we see that these instruments lift not just sounds in praise to God, but they lift the whole history of the nation's experience to God in praise.

Interestingly, the greatest description of the use of instruments in Israel's history comes precisely at that moment when the Ark is taken up to Jerusalem. In 1 Chronicles 13:8 we have the key to what all this means. There we read, "David and all the Israelites were celebrating with all their might before God, with songs and with harps, lyres, tambourines, cymbals, and trumpets." Note that phrase, "with all their might." How are we to praise the Lord? We are to praise the Lord with all our might. That is what is principally being taught here. This is a great message of Scripture: Our praise of God is not to be an casual or incidental, but wholehearted.

I love to come to church and sing. It is one of the few places where I am invited to do that! And it has always troubled me to look around and see people not singing. There may be good reasons for not singing occasionally. Sometimes I stop singing in some churches and my children lean over and whisper, "What is theologically wrong with that one?" There are times not to sing. But we are invited to sing praises with our whole heart. The Lord wants us to have an enthusiasm in his worship. And it is not really a matter of how much volume we can produce--that is not the primary thing to think about when we are praising the Lord.

Sometimes after I have sung a song in church which has particularly moved me and when I have returned home from church I have said to my children, "Now which psalm was it that we sang in church today?" They have learned to be ready because they know that such a question may be coming. But, you know, that is a good test. Can you remember what you sang two minutes after you sang it? Have we really

allowed the wonderful blessing of praise to fill our hearts, to fill our minds so that we are focused on what we are singing?

There are voices raised today that say we should not have too many words in our praise. There is even a little joke about it: the church now sings four words, three notes for two hours. But you see, God has given us an abundance of words to lift in praise to him, words that we cherish, words that we should love, words that connect us with all the history of his great redeeming work. Therefore, when we read these words about these instruments out of the history of Israel, what it should say to us is that both when we gather for worship and when we are out in our everyday activities of life, we need to be praising the Lord.

Now, obviously, we cannot drive a car and praise the Lord with all our might in the same way that we can praise him in church. But we do want to allow our hearts to be connected to God. That is why the Bible stresses the value of knowing the Scripture, memorizing it until those words fill our hearts and our minds. That is why it is so wonderful to sing the psalms, so that the very word of God is planted in our hearts and in our minds. When we really know the psalms, our praise can rise so easily and so naturally to God. So, how are we to praise the Lord? We are to praise him with all our might, with all of our focused energy.

The "Who" of Praise

Who is to praise the Lord? The psalm concludes: "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord." All of us who have been enlivened by God, all of us who have been created and have had the very breath of God breathed into us, all of us who have been made in God's own image for fellowship with him, let us praise the Lord. You see, we have been entrusted with a tremendously important task. We have been given a great command--"praise the Lord!" We dare not take it lightly. We dare not take it casually. But all of us who have breath, all of us especially who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ, who have been recreated, who have been born again by the Spirit of God, all of us who have experienced the saving work of Jesus Christ in our hearts, we need to be about the business of praising God. We need to fill our lives with praise, praising him with all of our might as we gather together and as we serve him in the vast expanse of the world that he has given to us. We need to guard ourselves against trivializing his praise as if it can be just a little corner of worship or life under the abbreviation P&W. Our minds have to be stretched out to the whole world that God has made, to recognize that we praise him everywhere.

Now I hope you see how this psalm is filled with praise and how it informs and directs our praise. Let all creatures everywhere with all their strength praise the Lord!

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