

January 15, 2023

Extraordinary Praise

Psalm 145

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Today's scripture reading is from Psalm 145, verses 1-10. This Psalm was originally written for the worshipping congregation to proclaim together, so let's read it out loud together.

I will exalt you, my God and King, and praise your name forever and ever. I will praise you every day; yes, I will praise you forever. Great is the LORD! He is most worthy of praise! No one can measure his greatness. Let each generation tell its children of your mighty acts; let them proclaim your power. I will meditate on your majestic, glorious splendor and your wonderful miracles. Your awe-inspiring deeds will be on every tongue; I will proclaim your greatness. Everyone will share the story of your wonderful goodness; they will sing with joy about your righteousness. The LORD is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. The LORD is good to everyone. He showers compassion on all his creation. All of your works will thank you, LORD, and your faithful followers will praise you. This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

We're going to do something a little different this today. At the end of the service, I'm requiring that all of you send me an email to praise me over what an outstanding sermon this is going to be. Phone calls are also welcome. In fact, I want you to praise me as the Prince of Preachers and the Pastor of all pastors. Praise me with loud voices, clashing symbols and a few "Huzzahs". Woah unto you who fail to do this!

Sounds absurd, doesn't it? I mean, I'd enjoy it, but what kind of egomaniac would ask you to do such a thing? Which raises a question that's worth pondering – why are we commanded to praise God? Is God an egomaniac? We praise children to help them build a healthy sense of self-esteem, but does God need a self-esteem boost? Is God insecure? We praise employees to show our appreciation for their work and to reinforce excellence, but does God need a pat on God's cosmic back? Does God's performance as God need reinforcing?

The answer, of course, is "no". So why do we praise God? Why is Scripture so filled with commands to give God praise? Why are there so many hymns praising God?

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation! O my soul, praise him, for he is your health and salvation! Come, all who hear; now to his temple draw near, Join me in glad adoration.

I love that hymn, and perhaps you do too. But have you ever wondered why we praise God? Part of the answer is that God is so worthy of our praise. Think about it this way. Imagine that you pass by an artist painting a watercolor on the street. You happen to see what she's painting and it's absolutely stunning. Without even thinking about it you stop, your eyes grow wide, and you say, "Wow, that is extraordinary!" You've just praised the artist without even thinking about it because praise is a natural response when we encounter something extraordinary. In the same way, this world is filled with the extraordinary artistry of God. The beauty of a sunrise or sunset. The symphony of birdsong. The miracles of life and breath and love. If we're conscious at all we can't help but stop and with wide-eyed wonder exclaim, "Wow, that is extraordinary!" That's praise.

But I want to suggest to you that there's more. I believe that praising God is ultimately for our benefit and not for God's benefit. In other words, God doesn't need our praise, but our lives are enriched when we make praise a habit. Let me share with you two interconnected ways that I've experienced the blessing of making praise a habit.

First, praise lifts your spirits. I have a confession to make. Sometimes I come to worship with a bad attitude. Some days I walk through the doors of our sanctuary grumpy or just feeling down. I don't really want to preach. I don't really want to worship. I don't really want to paste a smile on my face and greet people. I just want to crawl in bed and hide under the covers. And I'm guessing that some days you walk through the doors of church feeling that way too. But here's what I've learned. Without fail, when we start to sing and pray and praise God together, my heart changes. My attitude shifts. My mood brightens. My spirit is

lifted. Without fail. I have never left the sanctuary the same way I walked in. That's the power and the blessing of praise.

I love the way that Psalm 42 puts it. Listen:

Why am I so sad? Why am I so upset?

I should put my hope in God and keep praising him, my Savior and my God.

We know just what that's like, don't we? We come into this time and space with the burdens of the world. We're sad or upset about the news of the day or some hardship in our lives. And then we begin to worship and praise the Lord together, and even though our circumstances may not change, we do. That's the power of praise. And it isn't just true about praising God together in this time of worship. That power of praise is available to us every moment of every day. What a blessing that is!

Second, praise deepens our love for God. Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. Praise is the pathway to a deeper love for God.

I knew a couple in the last congregation I served who were really struggling in their marriage. Even though they'd been married for many years they were considering splitting up. But before they made that decision, they wisely decided to see a counselor. The counselor listened to their story and at the end of the session gave them some homework. He said that for the next 30 days each of them should focus on finding reasons to compliment or praise their spouse. Even if they weren't feeling it, they should give it voice. And then they were to come back and share what they experienced. And the couple committed to giving it a try.

The first week was really awkward. They struggled to find reasons to praise one another, and even when they did it didn't always feel genuine. But as they moved into the second week they each found it easier, finding simple things to praise their partner for. A meal that was especially well-prepared. The fact that even though their spouse had a hard day at work they still came home with a good attitude. By the third week it had almost become a competition to see who could praise the

other more. When they returned to the counselor's office a month later they shared how things had changed between them. They realized that over the years each of them had begun to focus on their spouse's negative characteristics and had lost sight of their good qualities, the very qualities that caused them to fall in love. They admitted that they still had lots of work to do as a couple, but the habit of praising one another had breathed fresh oxygen into their love.

I want to suggest to you that something similar happens in our life with God. If we're not careful we begin to focus on the challenges of life and lose sight of the miracles and blessings that surround us every moment of every day. The kinds of things I mentioned earlier...the warm sun on your face. A hot meal when you're hungry and a cold drink when you're thirsty. And when we make it a habit to thank and praise God for those simple yet extraordinary gifts, our love and gratitude for God grows. Instead of seeing God as a deity who seems to have forgotten us and left the world in such a mess, we see God active in an infinite number of ways bringing us simple joy.

Friends, I could easily give you ten more ways in which the habit of praise leads to blessing in our lives, but I'd rather you experience it for yourself. So, here's my challenge to you. This week make it your intention to see and to savor ten reasons each day to praise God. Maybe you open your eyes in the morning and praise God that you have eyes to see. Or you take that first sip of coffee in the morning and praise God for creating caffeine. This sounds simple, but you'll likely discover that it's harder than you think. We tend to go through our days on autopilot, unaware of the miracles all around us every day. You may very well climb into bed at the end of the day and realize you haven't paused to praise God at all throughout the day. And if that happens, just replay your day in your mind and praise God as you drift off to sleep.

God is worthy of our praise, but God doesn't need our praise. Ultimately, making praise a habit is a gift we give ourselves, lifting our spirits and deepening our love for God. So, let's join together in praising God right now in this extraordinary song, "Everything that has breath".