

“Praise the Lord”

A Sermon on Psalm 146

Texts: Psalm 146:1-10; Luke 4:16-22

My guess is that almost everyone reading this can recite the 23rd Psalm from memory. Yet can anyone recite Psalm 146 from memory? Probably not. Although not as well known as the 23rd Psalm, Psalm 146 is certainly worthy of our time and study. Consider the fact that Christians frequently use expressions like “praise the Lord,” and “hallelujah.” Where do these expressions come from and why are they used? These expressions come from biblical passages like Psalm 146. Like many other Americans, Christians are prone to place their trust in great men (politicians, military heroes, people of wealth and power), because such people can exercise influence upon our lives and our ways of thinking. But in Psalm 146, we are reminded not to place our trust in anyone or anything other than God, who is the creator and sustainer of all things. And then it is our Lord Jesus who alludes to this Psalm when beginning his messianic mission. So there is much here for us to consider in the 146th Psalm.

As we continue our series on select Psalms, we take up Psalm 146 as a representative of an important group of five Psalms at the end of the Psalter, the so-called Hallel Psalms (146-150). As we will see, Psalm 146 is a joyful Psalm of praise. Together with Psalms 147-150, these five Psalms bring the fifth Book of the Psalms (Psalms 107-150), as well as the entire Psalter, to a close. The five Hallel Psalms are classified as “Psalms of praise,” and are used as daily prayers in most synagogues. Collectively these Hallel Psalms reflect a sense of joy and delight and although not as well-known as other Psalms (such as Psalm 23, our subject last Lord’s day) this group of Psalms does include Psalm 149 (in which we are urged to “sing a new song”) and Psalm 150 (with its famous refrain, “let everything that has breath praise the Lord”).

So far in our series on select Psalms we’ve covered Psalms written by David, Moses, and the sons of Korah. We have looked at Psalms used in the temple (for worship), royal Psalms (with messianic implications), wisdom Psalms, and a Psalm such as the well-known 23rd Psalm, often classified as a “Psalm of trust.” We take up yet another genre (or form) of Psalms—a Psalm of Praise. This Psalm has been used as the text for several German hymns, and Isaac Watts’ hymn “I’ll Praise My Maker While I’ve Breath” is also based upon this Psalm. The 146th Psalm is a Psalm which directs us to offer praise to the Lord, as well as to exercise great care in choosing in whom we place our trust.

As a so-called Psalm of Praise (and part of a section of the Psalter devoted to praise), this Psalm is often called a Song of Zion (because of the reference to Mount Zion, in v. 10). It was almost certainly composed for use in the temple.¹ As with other Psalms (especially those used for worship in the temple), the authorship of Psalm 146 is unknown. Ancient Jewish tradition identifies Psalm 146 and 147 as coming from prophets Haggai and Zechariah, and therefore to the fact that these Psalms were written for use in the temple *after* Israel returned from the exile in Babylon, making these Psalms among the most recently written in the Psalter. There is nothing in these Psalms which ties them to either of these prophets, so it is probably best to consider this Psalm’s authorship as undetermined (unknown).²

¹ Leslie Allen, *Psalms 101-150, Vol. 21*, WBC (Waco TX: Word Books, 1983), 300-302.

² VanGemeren, *Psalms, Vol. 5.*, 992.

Psalm 146 opens (vv. 1-2) and concludes (v. 10b) with an exhortation for the people of God to praise the Lord (individuals who assemble together for corporate worship). Verses 3-4 call for us to renounce our dependency upon kings and princes, while verses 5-6 remind us that God is creator. In verses 7-9 we read of our sustainer and covenant Lord, who is the great king (v. 10a).³ There is also a progression in this group of five Hallel Psalms from the individual's praise of God (Psalm 146:1), to the people of God offering him praise collectively (Psalm 147:1, 12), with praise ultimately extending to the heaven and earth (Psalm 148:1, 7). These five Psalms wrap up the Psalter by affirming that God's word goes out to the end of the earth (Psalm 149) until everything that has breath praises the Lord (Psalm 150).⁴ This arrangement of these five Psalms is certainly not accidental.

We now turn to the text of Psalm 146. In the opening two verses we read, *"Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being."* The Psalm opens with the call to "Praise the Lord" (the Hebrew is *hallelujah*). This call is an imperative (a command) to praise the Lord which is followed by a heart-felt desire to obey the command—"I will praise the Lord as long as I live." The idea seems to be that each one of us as individuals offers our heart-felt praises (*hallelujahs*) to the Lord. Although each one of us praise the Lord, in the Psalm, God's people come together and form a chorus (i.e., public worship), of people who praise the Lord all our lives.

To put it another way, as the people of God we are called together to praise the Lord and together we form an assembly (all those individuals who praise the Lord from the heart). We are to do so throughout the course of their lives. The point is that our praise of God is not a momentary thing—"oh yeah, I praised the Lord once," but such praise to be the pattern of our lives ("as long as I live," "while I have my being" I will praise the Lord). It is not a stretch to say that the contemporary application is that we not be Easter and Christmas Christians, but we make both the individual and corporate praise of God an important and frequent part of our lives. In other words, corporate worship is the appropriate place for the people of God to praise our Lord and offer up to him our *hallelujahs*.

This call to praise the Lord has important ramifications. Because we are to "praise the Lord" all our lives, we are not free to direct such heart-felt praise to anyone else. In verses 3-4 the Psalmist tells us, *"put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. When this breath departs, he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish."* While we are to praise the Lord, we are not to praise kings or princes. Yet as soon as we say this, some clarification is needed because elsewhere Scripture seems to say otherwise. As we read in 1 Peter 2:17, *"honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor."* In 1 Timothy 2:1-3, Paul, like Peter, writes, *"first of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior."*

The idea expressed by the Psalmist is not that princes are kings are unimportant, and therefore not to be honored. Kings and princes (or even presidents and prime ministers) are raised up by God, and play vital roles in the civil kingdom where they exercise legitimate rule and authority. Because this is the case, Paul says, we are to honor our leaders, pray for them (which we do every Lord's day in our pastoral

³ VanGemeren, *Psalms*, Vol. 5., 992-993.

⁴ Grogan, *Psalms*, 225.

prayer), and even obey them as long as what they command does not conflict with the word of God. But the Psalmist says we are not to trust them or praise them in the same manner in which we trust and pray to God. A Christian can serve the king, the prince, or the president, but not the fuhrer or the Caesar who claims divine rights and prerogatives for themselves. Such a ruler is an Antichrist.

The Psalmist's point is that all rulers in the civil kingdom remain sinners, and despite their earthly prestige and power stand before God on the day of judgment just as the rest of us do when we die. This is why in Psalm 118:8-9 we read, "*it is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.*" We have no business trusting (having faith) in those men and women whom God has made, rather than trust in their creator. In chapter 35:2, Isaiah makes the point that on the day of judgment "*the fool will no more be called noble, nor the scoundrel said to be honorable.*" Great men and women are often not so great. In Psalm 116:11, we are reminded of the grim reality that "*all mankind are liars.*" Because they too are fallen, kings and queens cannot save us from the guilt and power of sin. Eisenhower, Churchill, and Stalin "saved us" in a sense from the tyranny of men like Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo. Because all of these men are sinners in need of a savior, not one of them could do a single thing about the guilt and power of sin. Salvation from sin can only come as a gracious gift from the Lord, not from any king or prince.

Therefore, not only are kings, princes, and presidents every bit as sinful as we, because they are sinful, like us, they are subject to the very same curse. They will all die and face their maker on the day of judgment. Kings and princes can do nothing to save us from our sins, and when their final breath departs (i.e., when they die) they too return to the same ground from which they have been formed. The Psalmist's words echo the words of Genesis 3:19. "*By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*" The greatest among us will die and be buried just like the least among us. Death is no respecter of persons because all of us are the fallen children of Adam.

And just like all the rest of us, when a king or prince dies, their plans die with them. Some leave greater legacies behind than others, but it is pretty clear that the building of pyramids in Egypt stopped when the dynasties which built them died out. The great cities of the Greeks and Romans lie in ruins. The great cities of the native Americans are not only in ruins but buried and largely undiscovered until satellites could see from space the sites where these cities once stood. The greatness and grandeur of all who have gone before is now only so much rubble. When we die, so do our plans and hopes for the future. We cannot save ourselves from our sins, and we cannot save ourselves from death. Yet, as the Psalmist tells us, when our plans are no more, God's eternal decree remains. This is why we trust God (faith), but merely honor the prince, who is but a sinner as we are, and whose plans last no longer than ours.

Since we are to praise God and not men, it is important that the Psalmist recount for us the greatness of God. Focusing upon God's greatness and his faithfulness to his covenant promises, actually stirs up faith (trust) in our hearts. As we read in verses 5-6, "*blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever.*" The Psalmist directs us to consider that God does indeed bless those who look to him for "help."⁵ This is the last of the twenty-six "beatitudes" (or pronouncement of God's blessing) in all the

⁵ VanGemeran, Psalms, Vol. 5., 994.

Psalter.⁶ The foundation of this blessing is the goodness of the Lord in whom we must trust, and in whom we must put our hope. The Lord promises to bless us when we do. For as we die and our plans die with us, God's plans and purposes are eternal. His plans are forever settled in the heavens. He is the God of Jacob.

The reference to YHWH as the "God of Jacob" recalls to the Jewish reader's mind the words of Jacob's prayer in Genesis 32:7-12. "*Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. He divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps, thinking, "If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left will escape."* And Jacob said, "*O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good,' I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. But you said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'*" Invoking the name (and the prayer of Jacob) the Psalmist reminds the reader that as the descendants of Jacob, they too will find help in the same Lord who answered Jacob's prayer.⁷

Not only does invoking the name of Jacob direct us to God's covenant faithfulness (God was faithful to Jacob and keeps faith forever—clearly a reference to God upholding his covenant promises), but the Psalmist directs us to the fact that the God of Jacob *made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them*. God has power and control over all things because he made all things. As their maker, he directs them to fulfill the purpose for which they were created. In fact, three times in the Book of Acts (Acts 4:24; 14:15; 17:24), this passage of Psalm 146 is either cited or alluded to, to remind those who hear the gospel that God (the father of Jesus Christ) has made all things. If God who has made all things also cares for his creation, and keeps his covenant promises forever, then this is why the Psalmist exhorts us to have hope for the future (even knowing that our feeble plans die when we do). Because God is the creator of all things, he has both the power and the desire to bless us whenever we ask him for help!

This hope is wonderfully summarized in Q & A 26 (Lord's Day 9) of the *Heidelberg Catechism*: **Q 26.** What do you believe when you say: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth?" **A:** That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who of nothing made heaven and earth with all that is in them, who likewise upholds, and governs the same by His eternal counsel and providence, is for the sake of Christ, His Son, my God and my Father, in whom I so trust as to have no doubt that He will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul; and further, that whatever evil He sends upon me in this troubled life, He will turn to my good; for He is able to do it, being Almighty God, and willing also, being a faithful Father." This certainly reflects the language of Psalm 146.

God is the maker and sustainer of all things, and he acts on behalf of his people so as to fulfill all his covenant promises. In verses 7-9, the Psalmist rehearses some specifics of God's care for his people. It is the God of Jacob, "*who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and*

⁶ Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 483-484.

⁷ Grogan, *Psalms*, 225.

the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.” Notice carefully that the Lord executes justice, gives food, sets free, opens eyes, lifts up, loves, watches, upholds, and then brings to ruin. This is not the kind of description which would make a deist happy. God does not create all things, set them in motion, and then sit back and watch things play out as some sort of detached observer. On the contrary, according to the testimony of the Psalmist, God is involved in virtually every area of our lives. This involvement reflects the blessing/curse principle of the covenant. God blesses his own in countless ways and yet brings ruin to all those who think themselves righteous, and who think they have no sin.

As we come to the last verse of the Psalm (v. 10), we are reminded that YHWH is the great king who rules over all things. *“The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, to all generations. Praise the Lord!”* YHWH rules from Zion, while dwelling in the midst of his people. His rule is without end (“to all generations”), unlike all those human kings and princes who return to dust. YHWH is to be worshiped (“praised”) all our lives—knowing that he has been and will be worshiped by his people and his creatures for all of eternity. According to the Psalmist, this is why we assemble together on the Lord’s Day, to “praise the Lord” and offer our “hallelujahs” to that one who reigns in Zion.

In light of the Psalmist’s command to Praise the Lord in light of YHWH’s covenant faithfulness to his people, it is rather remarkable then that Jesus opens public ministry by affirming that he is that one who executes justice, gives food, sets free, opens eyes, lifts up, loves, watches, upholds, and then brings to ruin.

Several commentators have noticed that the list of things set forth in Psalm 146:7-9 which the God of Jacob will accomplish on behalf of his people can be found also in the words of Isaiah 61, which the Psalmists’s words may reflect.⁸ In Isaiah 61, we read: *“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified. They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. Strangers shall stand and tend your flocks; foreigners shall be your plowmen and vinedressers; but you shall be called the priests of the Lord; they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God; you shall eat the wealth of the nations, and in their glory you shall boast. Instead of your shame there shall be a double portion; instead of dishonor they shall rejoice in their lot; therefore in their land they shall possess a double portion; they shall have everlasting joy. For I the Lord love justice; I hate robbery and wrong; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their offspring shall be known among the nations, and their descendants in the midst of the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge them, that they are an offspring the Lord has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.”*

⁸ Kidner, Psalms 73-150, 484.

In the 61st chapter, Isaiah speaks of the coming one (the Messiah) who will preach good news, bind-up the broken-hearted, set prisoners free, and who will dispense covenant blessings and curses.

It is the words of Isaiah 61 (with loud echoes from Psalm 146) which Jesus reads when he announces the beginning of his messianic mission. As we read in Luke 4:16-22 (our New Testament lesson), *“and [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, ‘is not this Joseph’s son?’”* In reading these words, Jesus is claiming that he is that one of whom the prophets have spoken, and it is he who will do those very things the Psalmist said the God of Jacob would do.

Therefore, it is through Jesus’ messianic mission that the God of Jacob’s covenant faithfulness is revealed to his people. It is Jesus *“who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.”* It is Jesus who accomplishes all of these things through his perfect obedience, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection.

When we read Psalm 146 in the light of the person and work of Jesus Christ, then can see what we would otherwise miss. It is the preaching of the gospel which gives justice to the oppressed. Because Jesus is the living bread come down from heaven the hungry are feed. It is the gospel which sets people free from the guilt and power of sin. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us faith (and therefore) the spiritual eyes we need to see the truth of the gospel. It is the yoke of Jesus (whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light) which lifts up those bowed down. The Lord loves the righteous, which is why he makes the perfect righteousness of Jesus freely available to all who seek it through faith. It is Jesus who leads the sojourner (the pilgrim) to the heavenly city. It is Jesus who makes us acceptable before the father and who makes us part of God’s family. And it is Jesus, who tells those who do not trust in him—*“I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.”* It is Jesus who, in his messianic mission, secures and dispenses every one of the covenant blessings and curses described in Psalm 146 (and Isaiah 61). Jesus is the God of Jacob and that great king who reigns from Zion.

This is why the people of God assemble together to “praise the Lord” and offer “hallelujahs” unto our creator, redeemer and covenant Lord. Jesus accomplishes all of things through his word and through his sacraments. Therefore, let us do as the Psalmist exhorts us to do. Let us “praise the Lord!” Let us “praise the Lord as long as we live.” Let us “sing praises to our God while we have our being.” For “the Lord will reign forever, the God of Zion for all generations.”

Beloved, together let us, “Praise the Lord!”