

Parish of Central Saanich - St. Stephen's & St. Mary's

LENT 2017 - BIBLE STUDY SERIES

"The Psalms: Tools for Being & Becoming"

Study #6: "Jubilation and Judgement"- April 4/5, 2017

Psalms 149 and 150

Opening Prayer:

Lord Jesus, you came to seek and save what was lost; teach us now, by your Holy Spirit, to persevere in prayer until it becomes praise to the One who takes delight in us, even our Father in heaven. Amen.

Introduction

We have reached the end of our Lenten study series on the psalms and are going to close it by looking at the two psalms that end the Psalter, Psalms 149 and 150. Psalm 149 speaks of praising God "in the assembly of his saints" (verse 1), of "the glory of all his saints" (verse 9), and calls on the saints to rejoice and sing for joy (verse 5). Now, we know that Scripture is clear that *all* Christians are saints – which means "holy ones" - not just the ones with the title "saint." Paul addresses his Corinthian readers as "Those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:2, NRSV). In today's study of these two psalms, we will see that, as saints, we have two tasks – to praise God and to execute judgement – so today's study is titled "Jubilation and Judgement."

A Suitable Ending

If you can think back to the beginning of the study series and the Psalter itself, we started out by looking at Psalms 1 and 2. We saw how they are not really prayers – which most of the psalms are – but preparation for prayer. We spoke about how we can be turned away from prayer by distraction and intimidation. In Psalm 1, we are called from distraction to attention. You don't have to wait for the "right time" to pray – meditating on God's word can focus us and we can enter into conversation with God anywhere at any time. In Psalm 2 we are called from intimidation to adoration. To avoid being overawed by the powers of the secular world we remember that God delights in taking what is weak and ignored and turning it into a vehicle of his glory to accomplish his plan. When we see how God has done this through his Messiah, we are amazed and inspired to worship. Thus, at attention and in adoration, we are ready to enter the Psalter and pray and praise.

Now, here we are at the end of the Psalter and these two closing Psalms, 149 and 150, mirror the opening two. The defiance of the nations in Psalm 2 is dealt with by the judgement of the nations in Psalm 149. In both cases, worship results. The call to be rooted in God's word in Psalm 1 leads to praise of God in Psalm 150. Obedience is not an end in itself – it is to lead to

adoration. Let us now look more closely at each of these psalms and see how their themes of jubilation and judgement can apply to our lives.

Psalm 149

Structure: Psalm 149 begins with an exhortation to praise:

Praise the LORD.
Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise in the assembly of the saints (verse 1).

It then focuses on two themes - celebration and retribution – which are reflected in the way the saints are twice honoured: “Let the saints rejoice in this honour” (verse 5) and “This is the glory of all his saints” (verse 9). In verses 2-5 we are honoured because we are able to praise God; in verses 6-9 our glory is because we are instruments of God’s international retribution on the enemies of his people. Let’s examine the first honour before tackling the second.

First honour - celebration: The first honour is that “The LORD takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with salvation” (verse 4). This is the basis for our praise – God loves us! We are special to him – he delights in us. Now “delight” here speaks of enjoyment and pleasure. The supreme God of the universe – our “Maker” and “King” likes hanging around with us! We may be nobodies (“the humble”) in the eyes of the world but he thinks we are somebodies. This leads to our praise of him. We are called to “rejoice in our Maker,” “be glad in our King” and to “praise his name with dancing and make music to him with tambourine and harp.” To me, this sounds like an embrace of two lovers. This is a beautiful relationship that results in praise which we will expand upon when we look at Psalm 150.

Second honour - retribution: But Psalm 149 continues in verses 6-9 with a second honour we are given and that is “May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands, to inflict vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples...to carry out the sentence written against them” (verses 6, 7, 9). Now this linking of jubilation and justice should shock our sensibilities. It brings up images of crusaders or conquistadors or modern-day religious extremists. These verses can be and obviously have been abused. But they must be set in context. First, this is not speaking of individuals taking the law into their own hands. The immediate context is “in the assembly of the saints” (verse 1). There is a collective will involved here. But we know that that, too, can take on an ominous tone and “ethnic cleansing” comes quickly to mind. This is addressed partly by the second point, which is that it is God’s will they are executing, not their own. There are issues of justice to be faced. Praise of God is not a flight from historical reality. “Singing Praise Songs is not an escape from addressing public justice issues.”¹ We touched on this theme last week when we looked at the “imprecatory” or cursing psalms.

Now, we can say that in *our* society, any vindictiveness we have can be controlled and dealt with through our access to the courts. Our legal system is not perfect, but it does help establish a sense of justice. But if we were Jews in a concentration camp, prisoners of conscience, or Christians suffering persecution we would have no such recourse. “In that case we may have to

¹ Howard Peskett in *Encounter With God*, Scripture Union Bible Reading Notes, Jan-March 2003, pg. 88.

sing and pray, believing that one day truth will be known and justice will be done.”² Verses 6-9 of Psalm 149 would then be a source of great encouragement to us.

Power in praise: But there is more than just encouragement, there is actual power in praise that can defeat God’s enemies without raising a physical weapon against them. In 2 Chronicles 20:21-23, the godly king of Judah, Jehoshaphat, stations singers at the head of the army “to sing to the LORD and to praise him for the splendour of his holiness.” It recounts that “As they began to sing and praise, the LORD set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated. The men of Ammon and Moab rose up against the men from Mount Seir to destroy and annihilate them. After they finished slaughtering the men from Seir, they helped to destroy one another.” In some mysterious way, praise released God’s power to overcome oppressors through self-destruction. The American Viet Nam War chaplain Merlin Carothers wrote a book, “Power in Praise”³ where he tells of the release of God’s power through praise. Now this is not wishful thinking, but praise pulls back the curtains of heaven to reveal the true picture in our lives and the world. God *is* ultimately in charge and our praise affirms that truth to our own hearts and those of others. Plus, when we praise, we open a channel for God’s grace and power to flow into us and the world around us.

This is why it is good to sing at the beginning of our worship. When you come to church each Sunday (and what I am about to say will emphasize the importance of regular worship) your thoughts and emotions may be all over the map – you may have just had an argument with a member of your family; you may have just discovered you or a loved one have a serious medical condition; you may have experienced a breakdown in a relationship; you may have failed an exam or discovered you have serious financial difficulties. Whatever your circumstances, when you come to worship, you need to see your situation from God’s perspective. Praising him helps you do this. It both reorients your mind while at the same time opens your heart. I remember attending my first Leanne Payne Conference in Vancouver one summer. It was an official course of Regent College – but we began the class day with praise songs. I was most uncomfortable – I wanted to get on with the talks – I wanted to learn new things – this was a university course, after all! But the problem was, if I did not begin with worship and upholding God in his rightful place, my mind – let alone my heart – would have been unable to receive the good of the material that was to be presented. Praising God prepares your mind and heart to receive what he wants to give you. This reality of the importance and power of praise is underlined by the content and context of Psalm 150 which we will now examine.

Psalm 150

Psalm 150 is the response to the exhortations of Psalm 149 to praise God. In Psalm 149, we are encouraged to praise: “*Let Israel/them...*” sing (verse 1), rejoice/be glad (verse 2), praise/make music (verse 3); rejoice/sing (verse 5); “*May the praise of God be in their mouths...*” (verse 6). In Psalm 150, we actually do it!

The five W’s and an H of praise: Now Psalm 150 answers the five W’s and an H of newspaper reporting⁴ - the who, what, where, when, how and why of praise:

²Howard Peskett in *Encounter With God*, Scripture Union Bible Reading Notes, Jan-March 2003, pg. 88.

³ Merlin Carothers, *Power in Praise*, 1980.

⁴ James Reapsome, *ibid.*, pg. 62

- Who is to praise? All of creation: “Everything that has breath” (verse 6) – no one, no animal is exempted from the call to praise. One commentator says: “Let whales sing and owls hoot, lions roar and dromedaries dance; let the skylark pour out his “profuse strains of unpremeditated art”⁵
- What are we to do? “Praise the Lord” (verse 1). In Hebrew, it is one compound word – “Halellu-jah.” It begins and ends the psalm and is found on every line - 13 times in all
- Where are we to do it? Everywhere: “In his sanctuary...in his mighty heavens” (verse 1) - this call is to those who worship God on earth in his Temple - us, and also to those who worship him in heaven - the heavenly host. Psalm 149 told us that we are to praise in public: “in the assembly of his saints” (verse 1) and in private: “sing for joy on their beds” (verse 5) – in other words, we are to worship God everywhere
- When are we to do it? It is not specified here, but the whole Psalter assumes all the time. Psalm 119 (164) says “Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws.” Psalm 92 (1-2) tells us, “It is good to praise the LORD and make music to your name, O Most High, to proclaim your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night.” We praise God not only on Sunday but the whole day and the whole week long!
- How are we to do it? In all ways: with a variety of musical instruments (seven are mentioned here) and dancing, obviously to accompany singing (verses 3-5). We are to use all the creative resources and energies available to us. We praise God with our whole beings
- Why do we praise God? “For his acts of power...for his surpassing greatness” (verse 2). God has done everything that needs to be done and is everything he needs to be.

Construction of the Psalter

Five "praise terminations" in the Psalter: Seeing this, Psalm 150 could be described as the definitive praise psalm. This is confirmed by the following observation. The Psalter is divided up into five sections or books⁶ (perhaps paralleling the five books of the law). The psalm at the end of every book terminates with a verse of praise as follows:

Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel,
From everlasting to everlasting!
Amen and Amen. Psalm 41:13

Praise be to his glorious name forever;
may the whole earth be filled with his glory!
Amen and Amen. Psalm 72:19

Praise be to the LORD forever!
Amen and Amen. Psalm 89:52

Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting!

⁵ Howard Peskett, *ibid.* (also quoting P. B. Shelly, 1792-1822).

⁶ Book 1: Psalms 1–41; Book 2: Psalms 42–72; Book 3: Psalms 73–89; Book 4: Psalms 90–106; Book 5: Psalms 107–150.

Let all the people say, "Amen!"
Praise the LORD. Psalm 106:48

Let everything that has breath praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD! Psalm 150:6

Each time, God is given praise and in the first three endings, it is nailed down with a double "Amen." The fourth raises the stakes with a "Let all the people say, 'Amen'" and the crescendo ends with the final lines of Psalm 150 – "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!"

Five "Hallelujah Psalms": But there is more. Not only is Psalm 150 full of praise, it is the final psalm in a series of five praise psalms (146-150) that each begin and end with "Praise the Lord" – i.e. "Hallelujah!" The psalm that precedes this set is 145, and it, too, is full of praise. It is an acrostic, with each verse beginning with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each verse describes a different item for which to praise God. In this way it is "the A to Z" of things to praise God for. Psalm 150 is the ultimate response to that.

What does all this tell us? It tells us: "The end of prayer is praise."⁷ Praise has the last word – literally as here in Psalm 150. This is confirmed by the name of the Psalter in Hebrew which is "Book of Praises." But wait a minute - many of the psalms are not praises; we have seen that a lot are laments or complaints – some even call down curses on others. Is the name of the book a misnomer? No; the name and the whole structure we have just outlined reveals that praise is the end product of prayer – prayer leads us into God's presence where "everything that has breath" praises the Lord – we see things from his perspective and rejoice that he will put things right. Justice will be done. "No matter how much we suffer, no matter our doubts, no matter how angry we get, no matter how many times we have asked in desperation or doubt, 'How long?', prayer develops finally into praise. Everything finds its way to the doorstep of praise...all prayer pursued far enough becomes praise."⁸

This construction of the Psalter to include pain and anger and doubt also shows us that, with this outpouring of praise coming at the end, there are no shortcuts to praise – we have to go through the pain to get there...it may take a while – don't rush it! However, praise draws us into the future reality that will be – "Our prayers give expression to lives that go far beyond the past and present and reach into what is promised and prophesied. When we pray we can no longer confine our understanding of ourselves to who we are or what we have been; we understand ourselves in terms of possibilities yet to be realized - in St. Paul's phrase⁹ 'the glory yet to be revealed.'"¹⁰ At that time all will be put right and we will be all that God designed us to be. For this we give God thanks and praise!

⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God, The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1991). Pg. 121.

⁸ Eugene Peterson, *ibid.* pg. 127.

⁹ "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

¹⁰ Eugene Paterson, *ibid.* pg. 128.