From The Pulpit Of

Praise the Lord!

Psalm 149 **June 30, 2024**
Nathan Carter

Text

149 *Praise the LORD!*
Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise in the assembly of the godly!
2 *Let Israel be glad in his Maker;*
let the children of Zion rejoice in their King!
3 *Let them praise his name with dancing,*
making melody to him with tambourine and lyre!
4 *For the LORD takes pleasure in his people;*
he adorns the humble with salvation.
5 *Let the godly exult in glory;*
let them sing for joy on their beds.
6 *Let the high praises of God be in their throats*
and two-edged swords in their hands,
7 *to execute vengeance on the nations*
and punishments on the peoples,
8 *to bind their kings with chains*
and their nobles with fetters of iron,
9 *to execute on them the judgment written!*
This is honor for all his godly ones.
Praise the LORD!

Introduction

We're taking an unexpected break from the book of Revelation today. Isaiah was supposed to preach the next chapter in Revelation today (ch. 19), but he got stuck in Australia on his way back from Fiji. So we're going to take a quick summer dip in the Psalms today and I pray it's refreshing.

I also pray you'll have grace for me. We're a church based on grace, right? I'm not performing in my preaching to earn your love for me, right? Great! I was camping in Wisconsin early last week, thinking I wasn't preaching this Sunday. I found out on Friday night that I'd be preaching today. Yesterday was Andrea and my wedding anniversary (22 years!) and we were out in Wheaton picking up Lucy from two weeks at a college program. So this isn't going to be the most well-researched, polished sermon. It's a half-cooked potato. I basically read Psalm 149 in my daily Bible readings on Friday morning and thought it was cool and so when the need came up I thought, "I could

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do Psalm 149," and quickly pulled together some thoughts on it for us to reflect on as a church.

But I am excited to preach it because I think this psalm will instruct and stir us to be an even more happy, joyful, zealous church.

Let's pray for that together…

Praise

This psalm, like the three before it and the one after it, begins and ends with the phrase, "Praise the LORD!" In Hebrew it's *hallelujah*! It sounds like a command, but it's more of an interjection than an imperative. This psalm isn't just telling us we must praise God. "You: praise God!" It's actually praising God! It opens and closes with an exclamation – *Hallelujah! Praise the LORD!* It's a whoop, a shout, an uncontainable expression of praise that is contagious and strikes the mood for this psalm.

If I just stood up here and just demanded that you praise God, that would be appropriate in a way, but it might be hard. It might produce the opposite effect. But if I myself burst forth in praise, it's contagious; it sets a tone and invites you in to this ecstatic joy directed to the LORD.

The LORD (Yahweh), you must keep in mind, is the personal name of this personal God that you have a personal relationship with. So it's different than just whipping up a crowd based on contentless frenzy – "Are you ready!? Lemme here ya shout." That has a contagious excitement, but no content. But *Hallelujah* is energetic and meant to spark a response, but it's directed toward a particular person who has particular characteristics and with whom you have a particular history. "Praise the LORD!"

Sing

Now the next phrase is a clear command; it's an imperative verb. The psalmist is instructing us in how we can praise the LORD. Sing! The Bible commands us to sing.

Singing is a special thing, isn't it? Singing does something different than simply saying. It engages the affections; it stirs the emotions. It connects the intellect – you're singing discernable words – with the heart. When you sing something you're more prone to celebrate it. Check it out: Jesus' blood cleanses us from sin and is precious. That's a true and glorious statement. Now listen to this: "*Oh! Precious is the flow, that makes me white as snow*." Some truths just have to be sung.

To the LORD

This says we should "sing *to the LORD*." It's cool to sing about the Lord (and there's a way to even do that as unto the LORD), but we should also directly address the LORD in our singing. I love to sing about "amazing grace." I also love to sing, "Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou my God shouldst die for me."

A New Song

"Sing to the LORD a new song." Our singing of God's praise shouldn't grow stale or rote, formal, merely nostalgic, or become a dead traditionalism. That doesn't mean you can't re-sing songs. Last week we sang "10,000 Reasons." My kids have been

singing it throughout the week. We've been singing that song for over 10 years now (it came out in 2011). And it has that line – "Sing like never before, O my soul…" And when I sing it, I think to myself, "I've sung this before, but since that last time I've become more aware of reasons to praise God and I know him better and so it's new and fresh for me. I can sing it like I've never sung it before because now I know him a little bit more."

I like old songs that have stood the test of time (e.g. "Rock of Ages"). But I also like learning newer songs that I think will stand the test of time (e.g. I think some of the new City Alight songs will like, "Yet Not I, but Through Christ in Me"). And I even find it helpful to sometimes sing songs that won't stand the test of time, but they stretch me. There were worship songs I sang passionately in the 90s that were meaningful then that are hokey now. Many of the songs that people are singing now will be outdated in a decade. But I think it's kind of cool that people are writing new music to express praise to the LORD. It's fun to find those songs and use them to praise God.

In the Assembly

So this psalm sets us to praising. It tells us to sing… to the LORD… new songs, and then it says – "his praise in the assembly of the godly!" Worship is not just private. We aren't just to sing in the shower or in the car when we're by ourselves. We're supposed to sing in the assembly, that is the church. One of the big things we do together when we gather is sing.

This can be weird for some of us, because singing in our culture is mostly a performance art. We watch *American Idol* and marvel at a soloist's voice. We think you have to sing like that to sing. The national anthem at special events is not a collective experience of singing about our country, but rather it has become a chance for one person to show off his or her vocal skills (and they always have to put their own individualistic stamp on it, right?). But God calls us to come together and sing in one unifying event.

We sing to God, but there's also a sense in which we are to sing to each other. Not to perform, but to inform, to remind, to encourage. Ephesians 5:18-19 calls us to "be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart." So we're singing and making melody *to the Lord*. But we're also addressing one another.

That's why we try to curve these rows so everybody's not just facing forward. That's why we don't turn down the lights. It's okay to close your eyes every once in a while, but it's good to also look around. Look at the faces of your brothers and sisters when we're singing and don't be shy to look them in the eye and say to them – "How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in his excellent Word. What more can he say than to you he hath said, to you who for refuge to Jesus hath fled." I encourage you to look around while you're singing and sing the words to each other and with each other. This is not a private experience. It's such an encouragement to me to hear a loud choir picking me up, bolstering my faith, reminding me of the beauty of this truth and that I'm not alone in believing it.

This would be a good place for a gentle exhortation to the Christians here to sing, and sing with gusto and fervor. I think we can keep growing in this as a church. Maybe you're shy. Well, remember the gospel! We're a grace-based church. You're not performing for acceptance. Get secure in that, and let your singing be a way of believing

that – you're not on *American Idol* being evaluated. You're loved in Christ, now stop thinking of yourself and start singing his praise.

Maybe you don't have a great voice. So what? And guess what? You'll get better at singing by practicing it. Also: if everyone's shouting, nobody's going to be able to distinguish your voice.

Maybe you're not feeling it. And I get that. Our hearts don't work quite right here. But remember that the liturgy is specially designed to give you truth to respond to. We're not just expecting you to show up and immediately be ready to sing. There's a CALL TO WORSHIP based on a text that tells us something about God. Then we sing. Then we have a chance to CONFESS SINS and the be ASSURED OF HIS PARDON based on his Word. Then we sing some more.

Okay. Maybe that's still too quick for you. You need more time to warm up. Well, then come to Prayer Meeting before the service at 9:30 and use that time to get focused, get your heart in the right place.

Maybe it's still hard. Maybe you've had a hard week or are in a hard season of life and you're just struggling. That's okay. We understand. We try to sing songs that express all kinds of different moods and are in different keys. But if you look at Ephesians 5:18-19 again you'll see something really neat. It says, "Be filled with the Spirit [by] addressing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." So what's one of the means of grace whereby we are filled with the Spirit? Congregational singing! In the act of letting go of your inhibitions, doubts, distractions… and giving in to the act of singing as an affirmation of these truths (even when you don't necessarily feel like it)… in that very act (I've experienced it so many times) the Holy Spirit comes and fills me with fresh comfort, fresh faith, fresh joy. I'm changed in the act. I don't wait to be changed to start singing. I start singing and in that process I'm changed. Standing on the side and not really participating only serves to keep me in the spiritual funk I'm in.

So sing! Maybe you don't know the songs. Well, every Wednesday all the songs we'll be singing are posted on our Spotify channel so you can be familiarizing yourself with them ahead of time. There's no excuse.

I want us to grow as a church that sings, loudly. I've been praying for this for years. And I'm patiently waiting. I'm trying to model it. Trying to do the things I can to encourage it. We try to find songs that are singable. I thought maybe it was the acoustics of the room, and we've tried to address that. And maybe there's still something less than ideal. But I think it's largely because not everyone is really singing. I see a lot of people distracted during the songs, singing half-heartedly or timidly or not even at all. I want to challenge us to try to sing from your diaphragm, full-throated, high volumed, every song. And let's see what happens and how the Spirit uses that for our souls. And if everyone is doing it, nobody will be able to hear you singing loudly, it will all just join into this grand event that reverberates through your bones and ministers to your soul, the soul of your brothers and sisters, and even arrests the unbelievers who find their way in her and think, "What in the world! These people really believe this stuff with all their hearts."

I was in a room recently where the singing was loud and so powerful. And the pastor said afterwards, "You know, you too can experience this every Sunday if you just minimize the accompaniment and accentuate the voices." I thought: "We're trying that. We don't have a band up here putting on a concert. It's simple. But it only works if people have been instructed of their responsibility to participate in the singing with

passion." So consider yourself admonished and encouraged. Let's be a church that's known for singing his praise in the assembly of the godly.

Gladness

Verses 2 and 3 call us to a culture of gladness among the people of God. Again, there are psalms of lament. There is a place for quietness and calm, reflection and a reverent composure. But we should also be able to express joy. And I think this is an area where we can grow as a church.

This psalm says, "Let Israel be glad in his Maker." Glad, happy, joyful! Maker, Creator, the self-existing reason for all else that exists – all the beauty, all the nature, all the gifts that make a culture possible, every heartbeat, all that we are and have is directly dependent on God… and we know him. He's entered into covenant relationship with us! The Maker of the Universe! We should be glad. "Let the children of Zion rejoice in their King." He's our King, he's for us, he's got us, all his power is harnessed to protect and provide for us. And we're the King's kids, his children! We should rejoice. Singing is a great way to express this.

But when you sing, other things start happening. Your body starts to sway. Your hands get involved. Other instruments often come in to play. It's a holistic, embodied experience of celebration. Verse 3 – "Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre!" Percussion and strings. A church culture should have the ability to let its hair down and just be happy in the Lord. To enjoy the sweet fellowship that comes from being together with our Maker and King.

Let me tell you about an experience I had last Sunday. After worship here I went down to one of our fellow Chicagoland Baptist churches on 87th Street. This church is a Haitian congregation called Gabaon Baptist Church. They were having a special service for the installation of two men from the church into the office of pastor and they invited me to preach. It started at 3:00 PM, but it didn't really get started until 4:00 PM with a feast of food. Then the service got going around 5:00 PM. It was a service filled with singing and Scripture. It was all done decently and in order, but at the same time it was marked by full-throated singing. They sang several of the same songs that we sing here. They were about the same size of congregation as we are here, but my ears were almost hurting because the singing was so loud. It was like everyone was shouting at the top of their lungs from the bottom of their hearts, "To God be the glory, great things he hath done…!" (except it was mostly in French, which was cool).

The service kept going on and on. More singing, more prayer, more singing. And I still had to preach. I thought, "This is getting late, I need to trim down my ten points." I tried my best, but when you're preaching through a translator everything takes double time. But they didn't care. They were listening attentively. Then after my sermon there was more singing. (Remember: they've already had service earlier in the morning; this is a second service!) I was tired, but I was encouraged.

Finally, a little after 8:00 PM the service wrapped up. But then the most amazing, beautiful thing happened. After the Benediction and everyone was dismissed, the band just kept playing music. It was like they were jam session. Old men were shaking maracas. Young women were going up to the mic to sing. They were still going! I'd been gone from my family approaching six hours at this point, but they wanted to get a picture, but there was such spontaneous celebration going on – people dancing, hugging,

kissing, singing – that the stage wasn't clearing. It was like I was at a house party, except it was the most pure, holy joy. I started getting jiggy with it a little bit. Eventually, we got our picture and I left. And I was one of the first. At the door they were handing out boxes of homemade Haitian pate treats. Outside on a summer night getting in to my car I could still hear the loud music spilling out onto the street. It was such a sweet, unforgettable experience.

Now, that comes more easily for different cultures. I understand. And genuine joy can look different in different cultures. I'm not saying it has to look just like that here, but I do think this psalm challenges us to grow in genuine enjoyment of the Lord together.

The Lord's Pleasure

What can inspire this kind of exuberance? Many people rely on alcohol. But we're not to be drunk with wine, but rather be filled with the Spirit, right? Some people get excited about national pride or sports victories or other things. But what is the reason for the joy we're enjoined to join in here? Look at v. 4 – "For the LORD takes pleasure in his people." The reason we can take pleasure in God is because we know that he takes pleasure in us!

God is not just a distant King who sits far off or far above, who gives us things: life, health, protection, but leaves us alone. No! Our Maker is our Husband (cf. Is. 54:5). He delights in us. He loves us. He gives us himself, the fountain of all joy. Why do we sing loudly? Because God, the holy, mighty, infinite, all-wise, all-powerful God sings loudly over us!!! Zephaniah 3:17 – "The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing." Our God is a singing God. He loves us! He genuinely, truly loves us in Christ. That's what makes us sing and dance and celebrate with gladness.

"He adorns the humble with salvation." For those who recognize their desperate need, who repent of their wanting to be King and bow before him in reverent trust, he adorns them with salvation, lavishes it on them, clothes them with the finest robe of imputed righteousness, decks them out with grace upon grace. How can you not smile at that? He gives salvation unmerited and loves his people. That's why we are a singing people.

Exult

"Let the godly exult in glory." Exult – to be greatly joyful, to have a feeling of triumph, rejoice, revel, delight, jump for joy, celebrate, make merry, jubilant, elated, gleeful, exuberant… (from the Oxford Dictionary). In glory – glory means weightiness, substance, importance, the opposite of lightness, frivolity, vanity. God is glorious. And he shares that glory with us. And it's a happy thing, a joyful thing. A joy not based on nothingness, not based on triviality, which is the fleeting joy that most of the world only knows, but a joy based on deep, eternal realities.

Singing in Bed

Next phrase – "[L]et them sing for joy on their beds." Public praise is connected with private praise, what you do in your own bedroom when you're left alone with your

thoughts and God. Do you praise God in private? There's a symbiotic relationship here between public and private worship. The people that are ready to get the most out of the public worship are usually those who have been worshipping at home throughout the week. The people who truly worship at home throughout the week are usually the ones who were there and engaged on Sunday. The songs we sing on our beds are usually the ones that have been imprinted in our heads through years of singing them with the church.

But the point is: this posture of praise is not just something that shows up in public, it also sustains you in private. My bed is a place where my mind wanders a lot. Sometimes to things I'm anxious about. Sometimes nightmares. It's where I am when I'm sick. It's likely to be the place where I'll die. And in all of those moments, this psalm calls us to sing for joy, to know how to find your hope and peace and happiness in the Lord.

High Praises in Throats

I love the next phrase! "Let the high praises of God be in their throats." Not just praise, but high praise. Not just in their mouths, but in their throats. What a picture! Are we a people and are you a person who has the joy of the Lord down in your heart and it just bubbles up with force out of your esophagus? If not, go back and read v. 4. Print it out and tape it above your bed.

The Two-Edged Sword

And if so, there's something else this psalm calls for. It's not saying that your whole life should be singing. The entirety of the Christian life is not just to be lived in private worship or in the assembly of the godly. These times of worship are to equip us to go out among the ungodly, to live in the world. We worship and we have work to do.

Now this shift in the middle of v. 6 seems abrupt and, to be honest, disturbing. "Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands. Sing and have a sword in your hand. What for? "To execute vengeance on the nations and punishments on the peoples, to bind their kings with chains and their nobles with fetters of iron, to execute on them the judgment written! This is honor for all his godly ones." Is this calling for some kind of holy war jihad?

In some sense, it was, back in the OT era. It the OT era God's people were a political entity, a theocratic nation-state. And so God's work was advanced through that kingdom, often militarily. God used Israel to execute his justice in this world. The problem was: Israel proved to be worthy of God's judgment too. We needed Christ to come and not execute judgment, but let God's judgment fall on him in his people's place.

And so now, in this era, the kingdom of God is not of this world. It is not connected with any worldly political institution. It does not wield the sword. It will one day. When Christ comes back he will establish his kingdom on earth. As we're going to see next week from Revelation 19 (Lord-willing; if Isaiah gets back) "from [Christ's] mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty" (Rev. 19:15). But until then, Christians are not called to try to advance God's kingdom by the literal sword.

But there is still a sense in which we are not to just be concerned with private and public worship, but be at work in the world, going out among the nations with a certain sword in our hands. What Ephesians 6:17 calls "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." Hebrews 4:12 says – "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

So, believer, your calling does not end here, with worship in the assembly, singing praise to God in church. And it's not just a personal thing that stays in the privacy of your own bedroom. We are sent out into the world with the Word of God, to bring the Bible into conversations with unbelievers, with the hope that it will convict and with the offer that there is a good, gracious, and glad God who will forgive all who humble themselves before him before it's too late. There will be a day of judgment, but now is the day of jubilee, a chance to come into the celebration. The people of God is open to anyone. We bring the sharp, two-edged sword of Scripture out into the world calling people to repentance and faith so they can join us singing around the throne. This isn't just truth for me on my bed or for us in the church, we have a mission to go to the nations, and bring them into the full-throated worship of our great God and Redeemer!

The Lord's Table

If you're here today and you've never bowed the knee to Jesus, you can right now… We hope you've experienced something of the grace that makes us a happy, joyful people…

If you're a believer here and you've been baptized and joined a local assembly, then this sing-fest also has food. It's a true celebration. At the Lord's Table we sing and rejoice and eat and remember that Jesus is here with us. He has provided everything we need, most importantly the sacrifice required to atone for our sins and exempt us from God's judgment – his body and blood. And he presides over this Table, singing over us with love and delight. Let's sing back to him. Let's really try this: everyone trying to sing as loudly as you possibly can – "Oh that rugged cross my salvation, where Your love poured out over me, now my soul cries out, 'Hallelujah! Praise and honor unto Thee!'"

Benediction

"May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us… that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy… Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you" (Ps. 67:1-5)!

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, June 30, 2024. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.