

West Van Baptist, July 12
Summer Psalms: Praise from Dawn to Dusk
Psalm 113

I. The treasure under your seat

Sometimes at special events we hide prizes under people's chairs. I don't know who started the practice, but it's become common, and it's kind of fun. At the end of the dinner, you reach under your seat, and if you find the sticker, you get to take the centerpiece home! Or maybe a couple people in the room get a gift certificate. Or a lucky winner gets an all-expense-paid weekend at the Spuzzum Holiday Inn.

I wonder what would happen if we tried it at church? Under one seat in one of the pews is a gift certificate for ... lunch with Aldo! Wouldn't that be great? Maybe if we put the prize under one of the front pews, we could get more people sitting up here.

Actually, there's already a treasure in every one of our pews. It's not a gift certificate, or something to take home. But it's a gift that's worth looking at. It's called a hymnal, or hymn-book!

I think most of you know that I value hymn-books. It's not uncommon for me to quote a hymn when I'm praying, or in a newsletter or sermon. This isn't a comment on musical style—I love good contemporary Christian songs, too. I appreciate every piece of music that lifts my heart to God in worship. The thing about a hymn-book is that it gathers songs collected over hundreds of years. So if there are 641 songs in the book, you can be sure that there will be at least 100 that are really good—even if you have to endure some “thee's” and “thou's” and other funny language in the older ones.

I'm not suggesting that Neil needs to make us dig out the hymn-books when we sing every Sunday morning. It might be good to have a hymn-sing from time to time. But on the whole, I'm glad we focus on songs that use contemporary English and a more current style. After all, we want to be a church that passes our faith to the next generation and to non-churched people who come to explore Christianity. Besides, to be quite honest, it's easier for most of us to read PowerPoint on the screen than the small print in the hymnal.

At the same time, I do want to encourage everyone: get to know the hymn-book a little. Don't try reading through the whole thing. Of those 641 songs, some are hard to sing. To be honest, in some the poetry isn't very good. Instead, maybe do a Google search for “favorite hymns,” or ask a friend about their favorites, then look those up in the hymnal. Find a few that speak to your heart. Your worship will be enriched by getting to know some of the classic Christian songs as well as the ones we sing all the time on Sundays.

God's people have always collected songs to help us worship. When I was growing up, most were in books like this. Today people are more likely to have a CD collection or Spotify list. For ancient Israel, and for the church across the ages, the most widely-used song collection was the book of Psalms. (In fact, for a long time some Christian groups only sang versions of the Psalms.)

God knows that it's good for His people to sing together in worship. He understands we need music and poetry that speaks to the many different feelings and experiences of life. His Spirit uses all the types of songs written by people who love Him; and all have their place. Still, there is something special about the book of Psalms. This is the collection of poetry God gave us in His Word. It's our *inspired* song-book. God speaks to us through these ancient poems, helping us to worship and pray in the different situations we face, offering guidance for all our other worship practices. It's important that we spend time in the Psalms regularly, both as individuals and together as the church.

So once again this summer we're going to do a series of sermons from the Psalms, beginning this week and running through July and August. I'm excited about this series. I'm always blessed by studying the Psalms. I hope it's enriching for you, too.

Today, we're going to begin with Psalm 113.

II. A simple, powerful message

In most psalms, the central message is obvious, and it's easy to join the psalm-writer's worship. That's one of the reasons we love the Psalms—and other good worship songs. Even if we don't understand every little detail, the big idea is clear, and we can always find a section or phrase that speaks to our hearts.

Psalm 113 is all about praise. It starts in verse 1 with "*Praise the LORD!*" and it ends with the same words in verse 9.

In between, there are 3 main sections. The psalm is short enough that you can see them pretty easily, especially if you're reading a translation like the NIV which leaves spaces between sections.

(1) There is a call to praise.

Praise the LORD, you His servants; praise the name of the LORD.

Let the name of the LORD be blessed, both now and forevermore.

From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the LORD is to be praised.

The psalm urges all God's servants to praise Him and bless His name. That means this psalm is for us, and for everyone who wants to walk with God. We're all "*His servants.*"

We should praise Him *now*, where we are, whatever is happening in our lives. And because He is the Everlasting God, the Eternal One, the one who will ultimately destroy evil and make all things good, He will be praised "*forevermore.*" The Psalms often speak about this. We get a reminder in the Lord's Prayer, too. Remember: in it we say that His "*is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever.*"

My favorite line in this psalm comes in verse 3: the LORD's name is to be praised *from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets*. Actually in Hebrew this reads: *from the rising of the sun to its setting*. It's great poetry with a double meaning. God deserves to be praised all day long, from the time the sun rises until the time it goes down. He also deserves to be praised in every place, as far east and west as you can go. Praise everywhere, all the time!

(2) Why should we praise Him like this? The next 2 sections of the psalm give us 2 reasons. First, verses 4 to 6 tell us that our **God deserves praise because He is so very great.**

*The LORD is exalted over all the nations, His glory above the heavens.
Who is like the LORD our God, the One who sits enthroned on high,
who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?*

He is greater than anyone or anything. There are powerful nations in the world, with mighty armies, great riches, amazing achievements, and impressive histories. God is greater. Stronger, wiser, older, more advanced, better resourced, more impressive and wonderful.

And He's not just greater than human powers. His glory is more impressive than anything you can find on our earth or in the heavens beyond. Are you delighted by the beauty of a waterfall or mountain range? Awed by the vastness and power of the ocean? Stunned at the expanse of our solar system with its sun? Dumb-struck at the distances to even the nearest stars and beyond across our galaxy? Amazed at the new things the astronomers keep learning about the universe? God is greater. Larger. More powerful. More ancient. More amazing.

Who is like Him? What else is like Him? No one, and nothing. That's what it means to say He is "holy." He is in a class all His own. There are many things that impress us and cause us to stop and "wow!" at their beauty and majesty. And none comes close to God the Creator. In fact, He needs to stoop, to kneel down low and squint, maybe pull out His magnifying glass to see our universe—not to mention this little planet earth. Of course we should praise Him!

(3) Then verses 7-9 give us another reason to praise, one that is even more amazing. God who is so great, so majestic and holy, is also **gracious and good.**

*He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
He seats them with princes, with the princes of His people.
He settles the childless woman in her home as a happy mother of children.*

God has to stoop down to see the Milky Way and the far reaches of every galaxy. Yet somehow He sees, notices, and cares about people. And not just rich, powerful, famous people. He sees the poor, the needy, those who are ashamed and unloved and alone. Men and women, young and old. He sees them, His heart goes out to them, and He loves to lift them up, provide for their needs, bless them and fill them with joy. We see many examples of this in normal life. And even where we don't see it right away, we are confident that it will ultimately happen, because it's just God's nature to be kind and good.

Wow. So again, there's only one thing to say: *"Praise the LORD!"*

We could stop the message right there, couldn't we? If we learn nothing else on our journey with God this week, it would be enough to have a clear understanding of our LORD's greatness and goodness, and to respond with whole-hearted praise. That's a lot of what it means to walk with Him.

By the way, can I insert a suggestion here? One of the most helpful things about good songs—and Psalms—of worship, is that they are memorable. This is part of their value for Christian living. I don't hear as much about memorizing Scripture as I did when I was growing up. But even in an age

of smart phones and AI where we have a world of information in our pockets, still, few disciplines are as useful for the Christian life as being able to recite Scripture and other good, true phrases from memory whenever we need them.

So, as one practical response to this sermon series, can I suggest that we all embrace the discipline of memorizing some verses from the Psalms that touch our hearts? This doesn't have to be a burden or hardship. You can learn a whole psalm if you want, but even a few verses from the psalms we study will do. Find some favorites. Write them down—perhaps in your phone to take with you. Include them in your prayers. Let them become part of you. Then see how God will bring them to life for you this summer and beyond.

III. A couple additional thoughts

The main ideas in this psalm are very clear. But we still have a little time, so perhaps you'll let me point out a couple things that aren't so obvious at first glance.

(1) The "Egyptian Hallel"

First, your Bible may or may not have a footnote about this, but Psalm 113 is the first in a group of psalms called the "Egyptian Hallel." Every year when Jewish people celebrate Passover, they sing Psalms 113-118, some just before their Passover meal and some afterwards. They've been doing this for thousands of years; it's what Jesus and His disciples would have done at Passover.

That word "hallel" means praise. We sometimes say "Hallelujah!" When we do, we're using Hebrew words. "Hallel" is "praise," "hallelu" is the verb "you give praise!" and "Yah" is short for Yahweh, the name of God. If I read verse 1 to you in Hebrew, it would sound something like this:

Hallelu-YAH, hallelu avdey YHWH, hallelu eth shem YHWH.

So what? Well, one section of our hymn-book is filled with Christmas carols. When we sing those songs we think about Jesus' birth. Similarly, a section of the Psalms are Passover songs—"Exodus carols." When we read them it's appropriate to remember how God delivered Israel from Egypt.

Try reading Psalm 113 with the Exodus in mind. It won't change the main meaning, but it will add a dimension. God deserves praise for His greatness; He is greater than all the nations, including powerful nations like ancient Egypt. And He is gracious to the needy, which was beautifully displayed when He saved His powerless people from Egypt.

You and I might not have ceremonies to remember how our families were saved from Egypt. But we're all encouraged by the Bible's Exodus story. It reminds us that God is more powerful than our enemies, and able to save us from sin and trouble, just as He did for Israel. That's what He is like, and that's why we praise Him.

(2) The "name of the LORD"

Over and over this psalm talks about praising "the name of the LORD." Actually, the Bible uses a number of names for God; but one is extra-special. That's the name Yahweh, and it's the name Psalm 113 always uses.

You won't see Yahweh in most of our Bible translations. Instead they use the word "LORD" written in all capitals. This is done out of respect for a very old Jewish tradition. For many centuries the Jews would never pronounce the name Yahweh because they felt this would put them at risk of sinning by "taking the Lord's name in vain." Instead, wherever they saw the letters YHWH (Hebrew was written without vowels), they said "Adonai"—"Lord"—instead.

Though our translations still follow this tradition, today Christians are comfortable with the name Yahweh. After all, God told His people to call Him by this name. We find this in Exodus 3. God met Moses and sent him to deliver Israel from Egypt. Moses inquired: "When the people ask who has sent me, what should I tell them?" And God responded, "*Say to the Israelites, 'I AM' has sent me to you*" (Ex 3:14). In Hebrew that name "I AM" is YHWH—Yahweh. (In some older English translations you'll see it spelled with different vowels as "Jehovah.")

When God revealed this name to Moses, it was a reminder that He is the living God—the true God, unlike Egypt's false idols. He is Creator, the One who has always been. It was also a way of saying, "I'm inviting you, and the rest of My people, into a personal relationship with Me. You can call me by a name I haven't shared with others."

When I was in seminary, we were expected to address our professors with respect. So we called them Dr. Brown and Dr. Carson and Dr. Kantzer. Then one day I was invited to be a TA for one of my profs, working alongside him, helping with grading and prep and various tasks. I still remember sitting down in Dr. Brown's office to chat. He said, "Now that you're working with me, you need to call me Joe." I almost fell over. But we had a closer relationship and it came with a more intimate name. That's what "Yahweh" was for God's people.

Notice: this is also a part of the Exodus story. God gave Israel this name when He saved them from Egypt.

So what? "Praise the LORD!" and "Praise *the name* of the LORD!" both mean the same thing: God deserves praise. But it does matter. Psalm 113 constantly reminds us that God has invited us to call Him by name—to celebrate our intimate relationship with Him. That's something to sing about.

(3) "A happy mother of children"

Finally, a word about the blessing of having children in verse 9.

Many of you were here 2 weeks ago when I preached on the genealogies in Genesis. If you weren't, or if you've forgotten, here's a quick summary.

- In Genesis 3 God made a promise. One day the Enemy of God and His people will be defeated, and sin will be overcome. This will be done by a "seed of the woman," someone from the human family.
- As a reminder of this promise, every major section of Genesis ends with a genealogy: a list of family members.
- This theme is picked up and developed across the Old Testament. We're told to expect a coming Savior from the family of David, a Messiah.

- Ultimately the promise is fulfilled in Jesus. He is Son of David, the Son of Man, who defeats sin and death.

Because of this theme, having children was especially important in the Old Testament. It didn't just mean having kids to help with the farm and care for me in my old age. Children were a reminder of God's promise; and childlessness was a source of shame.

One of the best examples of this is found in the book of 1 Samuel. There, a lady named Hannah had no children. She prayed earnestly that God would give her a son. He answered, and she had Samuel. Then Hannah sang a song of praise—not just about a baby, but praise for God's *salvation*. That song included these words:

*The LORD ... raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
He sets them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor....
He will give strength to His king, and exalt the horn of His Anointed One. (1 Sam 2:8, 10)*

When Psalm 113 says "*He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap; He sets them with princes,*" it is quoting Hannah's song. When Psalm 113 speaks of the mother who will have children, it isn't just saying God is good to women. It's also yet another reminder of God's ancient promise to bring a Savior born of a woman.

Again, this doesn't change the basic message of Psalm 113. But it adds more depth, especially for us as Christians, since we understand that God's promise has been fulfilled in Jesus. *Praise the LORD!*

IV. How do we respond?

What a great psalm! Simple, and powerful, and rich and deep. How do we respond to its message? Here are a few thoughts.

(1) We respond ... with words and hearts and lives filled with praise

In a few moments we're going to sing the song "What can I do but praise You?" "What can I do but give my life to You? Hallelujah!" That's exactly the right response, and it should be part of our lives all the time, from the rising of the sun to its setting.

Of course, in life we face different situations and we have different emotions. This is clear in the Psalms, too. Some psalms praise, some grieve, and some struggle. The Psalms teach us to walk with God in all life's seasons.

Still, God is always worthy of praise. He is always great, and always good. If we really understand who He is, and if He really is the most important thing in our lives, then we should be characterized by praise. It should flow from our hearts and mouths, naturally and regularly.

It's always good to ask myself: when people think about me, is praise and worship one of the first things that comes to mind? If not, perhaps I need to spend some more time in the Psalms, refocusing my attention. If it is, great! Keep on praising!

(2) We respond ... with respect for God's name

God's names are part of how He reveals Himself to us. He lets us know that He is Creator; Deliverer; the great I AM. The one who invites us to call Him Father. We need to pay attention to the things God tells us about Himself and respond appropriately.

Here I feel the need to add a friendly word of exhortation. Our world has become careless and even disrespectful of anything that has to do with God, including the names that help us understand Him. This takes many forms. One is the almost constant use of words and expressions that ought to be worshipful, but now have come to mean nothing at all, or worse, to be used as curses. Everywhere you hear people saying "Oh my god," "Jesus Christ," and related things that do not connect the name of God with praise. Often it's unintentional—just a habit people pick up, like saying "like" in, like, every other sentence. Sometimes it really does reflect an anti-God attitude.

In any case, it's a habit that can rub off on us, especially if we're new to Christian faith, or new to the English language, or just not paying attention. It's not a helpful habit. Can I encourage us all to be aware, and careful about the way we use words and names that relate to our Lord?

I'm not asking us to be paranoid about our language. It never really helped the Jews to avoid saying "Yahweh" because they were afraid of taking God's name in vain. What I am encouraging us to do is to become so oriented toward worship that we find it impossible to speak words like "God," "Lord," "Jesus," or "Christ" without associated them with prayer and praise. Can we help each other to grow in the discipline of worship in all our words?

(3) We respond ... by noticing that Psalm 113 points to Jesus

The signpost in this psalm is subtle. There's no explicit reference to David or Messiah or the "seed of the woman." It's a song about God's nature and goodness, illustrated when He delivered Israel from Egypt.

But the Exodus was always a pointer to a greater promise. It's good that Israel was set free, but that was never enough. It didn't solve the sin problem. That required a stronger medicine: the fulfillment of the ancient promise from Genesis 3. Psalm 113 reminds us of God's promise, and it offers encouragement: surely the gracious LORD who gives children to a childless woman is able, and willing, and faithful to bring the Savior—the "seed of the woman"—when the time is right.

This was still in the future when the psalm was written. Today, we know that the promise *has been fulfilled*. God *has* sent His Son, giving His life for us, bringing forgiveness and healing, defeating sin and death, offering new life for today and for eternity. Now we who follow Jesus have even more reasons to celebrate and praise.

So, when we read Psalm 113, we join with God's people across the ages, lifting Him up for His greatness and His kind, gracious heart. As Christians, we can praise even more loudly, because we've seen God's goodness expressed in its fulness in our Lord Jesus.

What can we do but praise Him? Hallelujah! *Praise the LORD!*

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Praise the LORD!

We praise Him—all of us who serve Him.

We praise the LORD's name now today, and forever.

From east to west, from dawn to dusk, the LORD's name deserves our praise.

The LORD is greater than any and every nation of the world,
more wonderful and powerful than anything in the universe.

No one else is like Him. He is the highest King, far above our little world
and everything else in creation.

Yet He sees and cares for the poor and needy,

lifting them up from trouble and giving them a place in the royal palace.

He helps the discouraged and shamed, giving the joy of children to the childless woman,
(remembering His promise to bring salvation through a woman's child).

Praise the LORD!