

Prayer as Praise to God

October 19, 2008 - Psalm 135

He's coming. He'll be dressed in red and sit in a big chair.

If you have young children, he's likely to attract their attention. They might even ask if they can go visit him. You've seen him. Maybe you even visited him when you were a kid. He is Mall Santa. Kids want Mall Santa to ask them one question. "What would you like for Christmas?" Some shier kids might whisper one or two items. Bolder kids might have a list typed out to show him. If mall Santa asks the golden question, smiles for the picture and gives vague promises of delivery, he has fulfilled his purpose.

But did you ever think about what it's like to be mall Santa? Anyone here ever had that job? Eighteen year veteran Ed Butchart says the job is physically taxing. After a full day's work, pain wracks his whole body, particularly his shoulders and back from picking up so many kids. He usually doesn't worry about the suffering because it's worth it to make kids happy. But there was one time when he feared for his health. That's when a 427 pound child came and sat on his lap. Ed was sure something would go. "But" he says, "There have been no lasting effects."

A restaurant chain surveyed some Santas for other on the job experiences. 45% report seeing camera "flash" spots more than 25 times a day. 50% have children step on their boots between 1-10 times a day. 60% are sneezed or coughed on up to 10 times a day. 74% have up to 10 children cry on their lap each day. 90% of real beard Santas have their beard pulled every day to see if it's real.

Mall Santas face some unique challenges. Wouldn't mall Santa be surprised if a child sat on his lap and said "I don't want anything from you and I don't even want you to pretend you can deliver. I just want to tell you that I appreciate what you're doing. It must take a lot to deal with all kinds of kids and different families. Thanks for the cheer you bring in this little corner of the world." I suspect shock, surprise and deep appreciation would grip mall Santa because someone praised them for what their doing.

If a mall Santa would be moved by a strange child coming up to praise them, how much more do you think God is moved when His children come to praise Him? Could it be that God is worthy of our praise simply for who He is and what He has done? Might prayer that offers up praise be something we can offer our God?

We have entered into a study on prayer through this Fall Season. We looked at several prayers dealing with internal issues. These inside issues require regular attention because we often face them. We sin so we must engage in confessional prayer. Life regularly moves beyond our control so we must learn the “giving up control prayer.” Sometimes God says no so we in prayer adjust to His no answers. Last week we looked at commitment prayer where David steadfastly declared his resolve for the Lord while in a cave fleeing from enemies.

Sometimes those personal issues take over and dominate our prayer lives. But if we only pray these prayers, we will only pray about ourselves and God. The Bible points us to go further in prayer. Not only must we look in, we must look up to focus more on the one we pray to. Then we must also look out in prayer for others around us. So today we start looking up in prayer to the One we pray to by considering prayer as praise to God.

This prayer involves no asking of God for anything. It calls us to look away from ourselves and immediate circumstances to focus

solely on God Almighty. What does such a prayer look like and how might we engage in it?

To guide us today, we will be looking at a Prayer of Praise that most scholars argue was written after something called the exile. The Babylonians soundly and completely defeated the Jewish nation in 586 B.C. To ensure complete victory and total domination, the invaders knocked down and burned all the cities. They killed many people and carried off the best and brightest like Daniel to Babylon. Yet about 70 years later, God ordained that some Jews would return to their homeland and begin the process of rebuilding. The prayer we will look at comes from that post-exilic time. We don't know who wrote it but it seems the author looked back over history and back over the Scripture. He took bits and pieces from both to create this prayer of praise to God.

It divides into 3 sections. First, it calls us to Praise the Lord. Then it explains why the Lord is worthy of praise. Finally it concludes with a renewed call to Praise the Lord. My hope is that by the end of our time together we will understand more clearly the Prayer of Praise and practice it as we pray together. Please find Psalm 135 in your Bibles.

Psalm 135 NIV

- ¹ Praise the LORD.
Praise the name of the LORD;
praise him, you servants of the LORD,
- ² you who minister in the house of the LORD,
in the courts of the house of our God.
- ³ Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good;
sing praise to his name, for that is pleasant.
- ⁴ For the LORD has chosen Jacob to be his own,
Israel to be his treasured possession.
- ⁵ I know that the LORD is great,
that our Lord is greater than all gods.
- ⁶ The LORD does whatever pleases him,
in the heavens and on the earth,
in the seas and all their depths.
- ⁷ He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth;
he sends lightning with the rain
and brings out the wind from his storehouses.
- ⁸ He struck down the firstborn of Egypt,
the firstborn of men and animals.
- ⁹ He sent his signs and wonders into your midst, O Egypt,
against Pharaoh and all his servants.
- ¹⁰ He struck down many nations
and killed mighty kings-
- ¹¹ Sihon king of the Amorites,
Og king of Bashan
and all the kings of Canaan-
- ¹² and he gave their land as an inheritance,
an inheritance to his people Israel.
- ¹³ Your name, O LORD, endures forever,
your renown, O LORD, through all generations.
- ¹⁴ For the LORD will vindicate his people
and have compassion on his servants.

- ¹⁵ The idols of the nations are silver and gold,
made by the hands of men.
- ¹⁶ They have mouths, but cannot speak,
eyes, but they cannot see;
- ¹⁷ they have ears, but cannot hear,
nor is there breath in their mouths.
- ¹⁸ Those who make them will be like them,
and so will all who trust in them.
- ¹⁹ O house of Israel, praise the LORD;
O house of Aaron, praise the LORD;
- ²⁰ O house of Levi, praise the LORD;
you who fear him, praise the LORD.
- ²¹ Praise be to the LORD from Zion,
to him who dwells in Jerusalem.
Praise the LORD.

Praise the Lord

This is a Psalm of praise to the Lord. The Psalmist uses the word praise or bless 11 times and mentions the Lord's name about 19 times in this Psalm. But before we plunge into it, we should maybe clarify what we're talking about when it comes to praise. Praise can be quite different from thanksgiving. Thanksgiving usually involves reflecting on blessings *we* have received in our personal lives. In Thanksgiving, we give glory for **what** God has done for **us**. This is a legitimate activity for any Christian. The Psalmist declares "I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart." (Ps. 9:1). David states

“O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever.” (Ps. 30:12). Jesus prayed, “I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth that you’ve hidden these things from the wise and revealed them to children.” (Luke 10:21). Paul prayed “I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you” in Romans 1:8. Ephesians 5:20 states “Give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” In thanksgiving there is still some focus on ourselves. Praise is different.

Author Ole Hallsby writes, “When I give thanks, my thoughts still circle about myself to some extent. But in praise, my soul ascends to self-forgetting adoration, seeing and praising only the majesty and power of God, His grace and redemption.” So in Praise – we give glory to God for **who** God is in himself and what He has done **generally**.

Like Moses who declares “He is your praise, He is your God. (D 10:21). David writes “you who fear him, praise him!” (Psalm 22:23). The writer to Hebrews urges us to “continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of lips that confess his name.” (Hebrews 13:15). John assures us that praise is the serious

business of heaven: “I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads and thousands and thousands, singing with a full voice ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’” (Rev. 5:11-12).

Psalm 135 begins with this call to Praise the Lord or Hallelu jah in Hebrew which is short for Hallelu Yahweh – Praise the Lord. This Psalmist moves from the simple call to Praise to an ever expanding focus of praise in the middle of verse 1. “Praise the name of the Lord, you servants of the Lord, you who minister in the house of the Lord, in the courts of the house of our God.” He calls on the priests to praise the Lord.

Now why would he have to do that? Isn’t it the job of priests and pastors to praise the Lord? Isn’t that most basic to our calling? Yes. But it’s easy for priest, pastors, elders, church leaders and ministry leaders to forget to praise God for who He is and what He has done. We can get so immersed in our ministries, families and personal thorn bushes that our vision of the Mighty God becomes cloudy. We

can let our praise depend on external circumstances or things going well in our ministry. There's no doubt that when things go well, it can be easier to praise the Lord. But there are no conditions set on this praise. It's not "Praise the Lord because the congregation is growing. It's not "Praise the Lord because that ministry event went well. It's not "Praise the Lord" because of His blessings in your life. Simply Praise the Lord, priests, pastors, ministry leaders, Elders, church leaders.

There is something pure and holy about giving God praise with no strings attached. This world conditions us to praise based on performance. You get people's praise for winning or succeeding or passing or completing or performing well. It is important to affirm those things. But praising someone for simply who they are is a rare gift indeed. That is what the Psalmist calls us to here. Praise the Lord!

In verse 3, He even provides us with a reason. "Praise the Lord for he is good." But notice there is no specific reference to a good thing done in this Psalmist's life. It is simply an affirmation of the goodness of God.

Then in the second half of the verse, the Psalmist calls us to sing praise to his name, for that is pleasant or it is pleasant. It's not clear what the word pleasant refers to. Is the name of the Lord pleasant or is Singing to the name of the Lord pleasant? Or we could translate it "He is pleasant or beautiful." We're not sure, which perhaps makes this phrase sweeter. All three are pleasant; the name of the Lord; singing to the name of the Lord; the Lord Himself. In these first 3 verses, the Psalmist invites us into a mysterious but wonderful world of simply praising the Lord.

But it seems this Psalmist knows the frailty of human beings. It seems he recognizes people need reasons to stay engaged. He might anticipate the objections of his fellow country men who have returned with him to the now devastated Promised Land. We know from the accounts of the return there were problems. There were rivalries and hard times. Some may have wondered why they should praise the Lord in light of the difficult realities surrounding them. So he launches into reasons why to praise the Lord.

Why Praise the Lord?

Reason #1 - He is creator and redeemer of His people. (4, 13-14)

We can praise the Lord because of His creating redeeming work on behalf of His people. Regardless of what goes on around us, God continues His work of creating, saving and shaping a people for Himself.

This work began with the nation of Israel. Verse 4 declares “For the Lord has chosen Jacob to be his own, Israel to be his treasured possession.” Jacob, in verse 4, is another term for Israel. Jacob was in fact the father of the 12 boys who became the head of the 12 tribes of Israel. Jacob’s name was changed to Israel (Gen. 32:28). God created the nation of Israel to be His own people. He called Abraham west. He promised Abraham’s descendants would become a great nation. A deliver would come from this nation to bless the world. God did not choose Israel because of their greatness. He simply chose them by His Sovereign will.

But notice at the end of verse 4 that phrase “Israel to be his treasured possession.” Now in ancient times, kings owned a lot of stuff – Land, buildings, cities, and people. When there was famine in Egypt, the people came to Joseph for food. He traded food for their

land and livestock until Pharaoh owned it all (Gen. 47:18-20). Like Pharaoh, many kings of ancient times owned cities, property, fields and slaves. But that kind of owning was not their greatest satisfaction.

In his palace, the great king would keep a box of jewels. These were his most precious jewels that he loved and cherished as his own. At different times, the great king would open his box to touch his jewels. He might say with a sigh of satisfaction “Ah, these are really mine.” That box of jewels is the Hebrew word “segullah” translated “treasured possession” in verse 4. So the Lord saw this people He created as His treasured possession.

The Lord views the church, His people today, you, in the same way. Listen to 1 Peter 2:9-10. “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; one you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” Did you hear that friends? God views Christians, many of us here today as a people belonging to Him. We were once not His people. Now we are His people and have received mercy.

Just like a great king would carefully guard his treasured possession box, our God guards His people. Verses 13 and 14 of Psalm 135 emphasize this. *“Your name, O Lord, endures forever, your renown, O Lord, through all generations. For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants.”*

The word translated “vindicate” is also rendered “judge” in translations like the New King James Version. But the sense here is not that God will judge His people for the wrong they’ve done and hold them to account. It is that God will judge what has been done to His people and bring that to account. So if His people have been falsely accused, convicted and even punished that will be exposed.

Did you notice that it is future tense? Verse 14 – not the Lord has vindicated His people. The Lord will vindicate His people. Perhaps the Psalmist, in observing the devastation of his homeland looks to a future time of greater restoration. Or it may simply be that he points all readers of this Psalm forward to those times when God in fact does intervene on behalf of His people. That can really comfort and sustain us in times of difficulty. Though God may seem to have overlooked us or delayed in helping us, He will assuredly appear as our judge and

defender. Pair that with the compassion in the last half of 14, and we have a picture of God who consistently acts to preserve and protect His people. That’s a reason to praise the Lord. He created His people first through Israel and now in the church. He redeemed His people through the cross. He preserves His people through His daily help and promised intervention in our lives. Praise the Lord.

Reason #2 – Why praise the Lord? He is creator/ruler over the Earth. (5-7, 15-18). Not only did God create and redeem His people, He created and rules over the Earth. Verse 5, “I know that the Lord is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods.” What does that have to do with creation? That verse simply claims God is greater than other gods. Isn’t this a religious debate rather than a commentary on creation?” But the pagans believed there was a god for every part of nature. There was a god of the harvest, a god of rain, a god of the river and god of the sun. Then as time went on, the Romans and Greeks adopted gods for different elements of nature. Jupiter was armed with thunder and lightning. Aelos ruled the winds. Poseidon ruled the sea.

But what does this Psalmist declare in verses 6 and 7? “The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas

and all their depths. He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth; he sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses.” There are not many gods in charge of different aspects of nature. The Lord not only founded heaven and earth, He governs all things according to His power.

This is a direct challenge to the prevailing view of that day that many gods ruled over different aspects of nature. God rules over all of it. In fact the complexity of creation and vastness of the universe points to the greatness of the God who rules it.

John Piper writes this in his book, “Don’t waste your life.” “Sometimes people say that they cannot believe that, if there is a God, he would take interest in such a tiny speck of reality called humanity on Planet Earth. The universe, they say, is so vast, it makes man utterly insignificant. Why would God have bothered to create such a microscopic speck called the earth and humanity and then get involved with us?

Beneath this question is a fundamental failure to see what the universe is about. It is about the greatness of God, not the significance of man. God made man small and the universe big to say something

about himself. And he says it for us to learn and enjoy – namely that he is infinitely great and powerful and wise and beautiful. The more the Hubble Telescope sends back to us about the unfathomable depths of space, the more we should stand in awe of God. . . . The point is not to nullify us but to glorify him.”

This Psalmist points us to this reality about God in verses 6 and 7. Then in verses 15-18 for contrast, he points out the foolishness of trusting in idols and false gods. Why would anyone declare that man made idols are in fact divine? Why do people worship rock stars, sports stars, business stars, technology or money as if they are God? They are nothing compared to the eternal God of the universe. In fact, those who trust in man made idols become like them according to verse 18. Trust in an idol and we trust in something that won’t last. It’s not eternal. It won’t see us through death. Worse than that, it leads us away from the one true God. Instead we must focus our praise on the Lord, the creator and ruler over all earth.

Why Praise the Lord? Reason #3 He is creator/ruler over Nations, Kings and History. (8-12) The Lord God of the Bible rules over all the kingdoms and nations. God has not been sitting up in

heaven the past few weeks with a shocked look on His face over the falling markets. God is not scrambling to recover from unexpected developments in our federal election. God is not worried about a dictator taking power or that person getting elected.

He rules over it all.

In verses 8-12, the Psalmist reviews God's rule over kings and history in Israel's life. God struck the first born of Egypt to release Israel from slavery. God sent His signs and wonders to expose the Egyptian gods as frauds. God struck down kings and nations before His people so they could take a land defended by vastly superior armies. He has ruled over history and kings before that time and since that time.

But that is not what you'll be told in our world or when you need a history text book. I just finished a book called "Worlds at War: the 2500 year struggle between east and west." This book argues the current conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq is a continuation of a centuries old conflict between East or Asia and West – Europe and its allies. But as I read this "history," I was struck at how hard this author, Anthony Pagden, works to exclude God from any involvement in it.

In fact he lays out his convictions in the opening pages of the book. "I make no pretense to be merely telling a story, nor have I made any attempt to hide my preference for an enlightened, liberal secular society over any other, nor to disguise the fact that I believe that the myths perpetrated by all monotheistic religions – all religions indeed – have caused more lasting harm to the human race than any other single set of beliefs." (xix). He traces the history of this struggle between east and west showing that for many years the East especially under the Muslims dominated the world. They conquered most of Spain and Portugal, much of southern and eastern Europe and all of the Middle East. Then the west pushed back recovering Spain. The crusades attempted to recover the Holy Land. But in the end they failed until the 1800's. That's when the west began to dominate.

Why? He argues that the west "successfully" broke free from the authority of the church, the Bible and of the "idea" of God. Instead the west has put its faith in modern science, reason and the ability of man to discover justice. So he concludes his book with this: 533 – "The lives of the majority of the populations of the world are far better because of what the secularizing West has brought to them, directly or

indirectly, than it was even a century ago. People live longer lives; they live freer lives; they may even live happier lives. . . . All, of course, is not perfect in the bright new secular modern world. Nor is it ever going to be. But that is simply part of the human condition. What is wrong on this earth can never be remedied by appeals to God. There is no Eden at the end of history, neither here nor in some imagined afterlife.” God has been deleted from history.

Now I understand Mr. Pagden’s conclusions. They make sense because his ultimate authority is humanity. He has concluded that man free from God will in fact save the world. I would be filled with fear to live in a world like that left in the hands of men convinced they have no need of God or that there even is a God. Yet I’m not afraid because my ultimate authority is in One infinitely greater than me. This book I hold is not a collection of “scattered writings.” It is a very reliable and well attested source called the Bible. Its unified message from over 30 different authors reveals that God started history, ruled over it in the past, continues to rule in the present. He will rule over it until He ends it.

This book tells me that God as creator of the human race has creator rights over us. We fell short of giving God glory for everything. God could have left us in that state. He could have abandoned us to His righteous judgment and wrath. Instead, God sent His Son into history. 2000 years ago, Jesus Christ was born, lived, crucified, died and rose again in history. Then God sent out the Gospel to bring people back to Himself. Amnesty is offered to those who come and receive it. Those who put their trust in Christ receive God’s salvation gift.

Then we enter into the privilege of relationship with our Creator. We begin to grasp Him as Creator and redeemer of a people which we are now part of. We begin to discover Him as Creator of the world. We become aware of all the lies we’ve been fed about God. We begin to see history is “His Story” not just some human-centered summary of past events. Our view of the Bible begins to shift. We discover it is not a collection of moral lessons. It is the theological history and story of God; His character; His work in history to redeem from sin a people and planet for Himself.

As we continue in this journey, we discover there is much to praise God for despite the difficulties of our lives. God reveals to us we need Him and His Gospel more than anything else. Perhaps you're here today, having been fed lies and distortions about God for years. Maybe the Lord is opening up your spiritual eyes right now to the reality of who He is and what He has done. Maybe He is revealing to you the truth of the Gospel and His Word.

Will you respond to His call today friend? Will you admit God is Lord over humanity, creation, history and your life? Will you admit your need for Him to save you from your sins and His wrath? Only because of Christ's sacrifice and blood, do we even have a right to approach God. Yet God sent Christ into history to provide this Gospel. If you say "Yes Lord, I repent or turn away from my sins and turn to you," the Lord Jesus comes in. You will begin the incredible journey of discovering our infinite, eternal, awesome creator and ruler. The Psalm began with the call to Praise the Lord. Then he laid out three major reasons why we must praise the Lord. The Psalm concludes with a renewed call to **Praise the Lord**.

In verses 19-21, the Psalmist calls all of Israelite society to praise the Lord; the house of Israel, the house of Aaron, the house of Levi and all who fear him. But the New International Version hides a slight change the Psalmist makes in verses 19-20. Instead of calling the people to praise the Lord, he calls them to bless the Lord. Blessing is a jubilant praise. It is praise raised to the highest point. It is an uncontained response to the revelation of God.

We are called to that praise today. God is still creator/redeemer over all; He is still God; still greater than any other god. He has no skeletons in his closet. He will never say something insensitive or do something immoral or wrong. He never fails and never breaks His Word. He vindicates us and keeps us as His treasured possession. So let us praise the Lord in prayer now. I would like to invite several of you to respond in prayer to Him by coming forward to praise Him and bless His name using the microphone provided.