

Worship (20)

Corporate – Praise & Thanksgiving

Psalm 148:1-14 *Praise ye the LORD. Praise ye the LORD from the heavens: praise him in the heights.² Praise ye him, all his angels: praise ye him, all his hosts.³ Praise ye him, sun and moon: praise him, all ye stars of light.⁴ Praise him, ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters that be above the heavens.⁵ Let them praise the name of the LORD: for he commanded, and they were created.⁶ He hath also stablished them for ever and ever: he hath made a decree which shall not pass.⁷ Praise the LORD from the earth, ye dragons, and all deeps:⁸ Fire, and hail; snow, and vapours; stormy wind fulfilling his word:⁹ Mountains, and all hills; fruitful trees, and all cedars:¹⁰ Beasts, and all cattle; creeping things, and flying fowl:¹¹ Kings of the earth, and all people; princes, and all judges of the earth:¹² Both young men, and maidens; old men, and children:¹³ Let them praise the name of the LORD: for his name alone is excellent; his glory is above the earth and heaven.¹⁴ He also exalteth the horn of his people, the praise of all his saints; even of the children of Israel, a people near unto him. Praise ye the LORD.*

Psalm 150:1-6 *Praise ye the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in the firmament of his power.² Praise him for his mighty acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness.³ Praise him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with the psaltery and harp.⁴ Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with stringed instruments and organs.⁵ Praise him upon the loud cymbals: praise him upon the high sounding cymbals.⁶ Let every thing that hath breath praise the LORD. Praise ye the LORD.*

Reading these two Psalms we find that this thing called praise is a massive obligation. Every created thing is to praise God; starting in the heavens with the angels and working its way down through the stars, sun and moon, into the earth with its sky and weather systems, into the mountains, hills, trees, oceans, every kind of animal, and every kind of human. Psalm 150 tells us that everything which has breath should praise the Lord, and he should be praised on every kind of instrument. If you sum it up, it is saying God should be praised everywhere, by everyone, at all times.

Corporate worship centres on the Local Church. The Local church gathers on the Lord's Day. The main part of worship is God revealing Himself through the preaching of His Word. Our response is, firstly repentance and confession, followed by consecration and commitment. We lift our voices in prayer, confessing, asking; but this naturally leads us into the section of worship most delightful to us – praise and thanksgiving.

Because praise and thanksgiving are in some ways the highest joys of worship, we tend to think of them first when we think of worship. People erroneously use the phrase 'Praise & worship' to make them essentially equal. But, as we have seen, praise and thanksgiving are one part of magnifying God's glory. And yet they are a very important part.

The Action of Praise & Thanksgiving

What does it mean to praise?

Let me overturn some false notions.

First, *praising God is not a performance*. Praising God is not an extravaganza which we put on to delight ourselves. It is not something we do to be seen by others. The so called praise team so often does the very opposite of directing hearts to God's glory, and instead becomes a show designed to entertain, divert and distract.

Praising God is not praising praise. When we praise, we are not trying to enjoy praise as an end in itself. We are seeking to exalt God, and thus we exult in Him. But we don't praise our

praise, nor seek our praise as an end in itself. Because then God would be just a means, and the end is the praise experience. No, God is the end, and the by-product is the experience of praise.

Praising God is not flattery. Praising God is not exaggerating our love for Him, or saying big things about God which we don't mean or don't understand. Picture being given a microphone and being told 'Norm is a great guy, really. Now praise him with all your heart.' Now you could start saying things like, 'Norm is amazing. There is no one like Norm. Norm is more wonderful than you can imagine. Norm is so good'; but to do so you would be insincere at best, or lying at worst. You don't know Norm. The praise does not come from your heart. So you simply exaggerate your admiration for someone you hardly know. You flatter him, by saying nice things which you don't mean and don't believe. That is not what praising God is to be.

Praising God is not cheerleading. Remember at school when you had cheerleaders at the front, usually in silly costumes. They would start singing silly songs and shouting war-cries, to get the crowd chanting support for the team or the runners or the players on the field.

Praise is not a few people trying to get a bunch a people excited about what they are not excited about.

So what is it?

The Hebrew word for praise comes from a root meaning 'To shine, and also to boast.' The idea is to show forth the sparkle and brilliance of God, and boast on His behalf.

Praise is what happens when a person acknowledges or sees something of great value, and takes joy in telling others of its strengths or beauty or value.

This happens all the time. Conversations are filled with people praising something or someone. For example, people praising a car, a favourite actor or actress or sportsman; people praising scenery, places, foods, music, weather; lovers praising each other; people praising countries, armies, machines, technologies, historical events, poetry, birds, flowers, the character of a person. Praising God is when this very natural part of us that sees and admires and appreciates something or somewhere or someone, and the praise we feel for it is turned to focus on God. And seeing His value, His beauty – we praise.

Praise is part of the enjoyment of something. When someone loves something, when they have great personal subjective enjoyment; what do they do to complete or consummate their joy? When you have discovered a new dish, or visited a remarkably beautiful place – what do you do? That's part of this idea of taking pictures isn't it? So that others may praise. Praising God is when we are so genuinely enjoying God, satisfied in him, finding Him delightful, that our joy blows its top and turns into praise. We boast about God, we brag of Him to others, and with others.

Praise is almost always done with others. A very few people can fully enjoy something alone. In fact, if you love something and tell others, and they do not share your enthusiasm – what does that usually do to your joy? It kills it! Praise is seldom an individual thing. You begin praising something in your heart, but maximum joy comes with bringing others into the circle of knowledge. It is saying, 'Isn't this great? Isn't it amazing? Isn't this clever? Isn't it grand? Isn't it beautiful?' And our desire is that others would share our appreciation of the value of the thing we are praising.

This is the heart of praise for God. You take these three elements – learning of something’s value; coming to enjoy it; and wanting others to know of the joy you have found – this is praise.

As believers, we come to know the value of God. We love Him; find delight and great joy in Him. His loving kindness is better than life. But it cannot stay all bottled up, so we tell others. We praise God in front of others and in the presence of others.

This is the heart of the Psalms. The psalmists have discovered the glory of God. They are brimming with joy in Him, and they want to complete their joy by having others finding out that God is wonderful, and agreeing with them.

So the commands here in Psalm 150 are not exaggerations. They are not cheerleading. They are saying – ‘God is wonderful, don’t you agree?’ They are saying ‘Taste and see that the Lord is good.’

The Reason for Praise & Thanksgiving

This Psalm gives us the reason for praising God in two simple categories:

- [His excellent greatness,
- [His mighty deeds.

In other words – we praise Him for *who He is* – His excellence; and we praise Him for what He has done – His works.

All of the praise in the Bible goes back to these two categories – who God is, in His nature; and His acts, His works. Of course, His acts proceed out of His character and reveal it further. So praise for God comes from knowing, in the best sense of knowing, who God is and what He has done.

Picture yourself at work, or at school or in some other situation, meeting someone whose physical beauty is simply overwhelming. You frankly find yourself staring, because you don’t believe you have ever seen someone with such perfect looks. You try to look away, but you are drawn to look again because the beauty is so compelling, so unique; you struggle to look away. You’d walk away from that quite affected. You’d probably tell people about the beauty you saw and begin to describe it to others.

This is the experience, only multiplied many times over, of a believer seeing the Lord Jesus Christ’s glory in the Word. It absorbs you. It transfixes you. He is so great – the Creator, the King, the Sovereign, the All Powerful – knows everything, is in all places, eternal, without change, perfect, infinite, transcendent; and yet He is so good. He is loving, gentle, gracious, merciful, meek, patient, fair, just, immanent, tender; and when a heart is not hard, when it is humbled, it sees the beauty of the Lord and is amazed, and it praises.

Praise is the reaction of a humbled heart to God’s greatness & goodness.

The other category is *what God has done*. And our response to this is gratitude. When a humble heart sees what God has done, it is flooded with the emotion of gladness for God doing these things on our behalf. And we praise Him for His acts, and we give thanks.

Gratitude is the reaction of a humbled heart to God’s gracious acts toward us.

Proud hearts do not see what God has done, do not see what they deserve, and so sense very little to be grateful for.

Your gratitude is proportional to what you think you deserve.

A heart which is content with its place under God, content with God, will be a grateful heart. Praise and thanksgiving are very closely related. Praise is more universal and deals more with who God is, and what He has done generally. Gratitude is more individual and thanks God for acting the way He has to us.

Now, praise is in many ways a reaction. It is a response to seeing God, seeing His nature and His works. But please notice that this Psalm clearly makes praise a command. Thirteen times it is commanded. The last verse tells us that if you have a respiratory system, you are obliged to praise. The Psalms command again and again – ‘Praise the Lord, praise God.’ In the New Testament, we are commanded to give thanks.

1Th 5:16-18 *Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*

Col 4:2 *Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving;*

Now if praise is not forced, if it is not exaggerated or flattery or fake, how can God command us to praise? Isn't that like the person handing you the microphone and saying, ‘Praise Norm, praise Norm?’

The answer is in the New Testament.

The Secret of Praise and Thanksgiving

Ephesians 5:18-20 *And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;¹⁹ Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord;²⁰ Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ;*

According to verse 18, what are we to do? Be filled with the Spirit. What then are the two results we find in verses 19 and 20? Praise in verse 19 and thanksgiving in verse 20.

Turn to Colossians 3.

Col 3:16-17 *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. ¹⁷And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.*

What is the command in the first part of Colossians 3:16? Let the Word have a broad resting place in your life – be filled with the Word. What then are the two results which flow out of that? Praise in verse 16 and thanksgiving in verse 17.

Being filled with the Spirit and being filled with the Word are parallel thoughts. A believer who hungers for the Word will give more space for the Spirit to control and lead and influence Him. A believer who is hungering for the Spirit to illuminate Him will be found in the Word.

Someone put it this way: ‘The Spirit of God takes the Word of God and shows you the Son of God. That is His primary ministry. So what happens when as an individual Christian you are rooted in the Word, living a life of submissive, dependent, disciplined devotion? The Spirit is going to illuminate more of Christ to you. The Spirit is going to open up more of the love of God to you. And as that happens, what will the result be? You will admire, you will cherish, and you will not be able to keep it to yourself – you will speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.’

So praise begins individually, but it reaches its climax corporately. This is why corporate worship is not meant to make up for your lack of worship during the week. Corporate worship is actually more like an outlet. You have grown in love for God during the week, and no one in this world appreciates it, but when you come to church, you meet believers who will agree – ‘Yes, He is marvellous beyond telling. Yes, He is to be treasured.’

The Bible is obvious when it says things like ‘Giving thanks always’ – that it expects praise and thanksgiving to be part of our lives; living a life of praise and thanksgiving – ‘Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.’

But it expects that our joy will ‘pop its lid’ with other believers, in corporate praise and thanksgiving.

Now, it is true we sometimes come to church and our hearts are drooping; we may be discouraged or weak, or spiritually dry. And the praise of God stirs our soul. That is a good and healthy effect of corporate praise. But if you have little to no joy in God throughout the week, praise corporately will go over your head. You will need cheerleaders. You will go the route of praising praise, wanting a warm emotion of excitement and enthusiasm, but with no basis. You will try to flatter God with high sounding phrases but they will be insincere exaggerations.

Corporate praise is resonance. Certain sounds at particular frequencies can cause an object to vibrate to that frequency. Musical instruments resonate

It is a matter of resonance. Truth, perceived previously and individually, resonates when heard or sung corporately. Various physical properties in that object mean that it responds to a particular frequency.

When musical instruments are in perfect balance, a note played by one will resonate with another. Corporate praise is when believers individually living a life of praise and thanksgiving join together. And what the others say resonates. We have seen that, or at least sense its truth, with the indwelling Holy Spirit, and we agree. Our hearts leap, and burn together.

When the Word is preached and God is exalted, our hearts resonate with it. We say ‘Amen’ to what we have already seen, and are being shown again.

When one praises God in prayer and exalts God’s faithfulness, our hearts resonate with that. We join in that prayer of praise. During an open testimony time, someone speaks of God’s great sovereign power in working out something in their lives, and our hearts resonate with the sovereignty of God which we have seen in the Word. As we give thanks and praise as individuals, and yet publicly, we praise.

Even when we fellowship informally, and we tell each other of the Lord's goodness to us, our hearts resonate with one another and join in praise.

Of course, our praise and our gratitude to God reaches such heights that there is a gift God has given us to express it. It is the gift you see mentioned over and over in Psalm 150 – music. With appropriate lyrics and appropriate music – we exalt our God in thanksgiving and praise.

If you are not allowing the Word to have a rich place in your life coupled by an obedient walk in the Spirit, the music and the lyrics will not resonate. It will be simply tunes, and the words will be simply poetry. And if that is your experience of church, then go home, open your Bible and pray – 'Lord, show me; show me what these people are boasting about; show me what they are enjoying and valuing, and then talking and praying and testifying and singing about.' And because the heavens don't open that moment, don't quit. Come back; keep coming back, until you do see what the fuss is about. Soon, no one will have to persuade you to come to church. You will be ready to burst and will need every outlet you can get.

