

Praise God with Music

Psalm 149:1-5

¹ Praise the LORD!

Sing to the LORD a new song,

his praise in the assembly of the faithful.

² Let Israel be glad in its 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 victory.

⁵ Let the faithful exult in glory;

let them sing for joy on their couches.

Psalm 150:1-6

¹ Praise the LORD!

Praise God in his sanctuary;

praise him in his mighty firmament!

² Praise him for his mighty deeds;

praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

³ Praise him with trumpet sound;

praise him with lute and harp!

⁴ Praise him with tambourine and dance;

praise him with strings and pipe!

⁵ Praise him with clanging cymbals;

praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

⁶ Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD!

Theme Statement

Praising God witnesses to God who holds past, present, and future together for the whole creation. God is worthy of praise because of God's mighty deeds of salvation. In praise, music helps worshipers express the goodness, power, and transcendence of God.

Exploring the Word

The Hebrew word for psalms is translated as "praises." How fitting that the last five psalms in the book are praise or "Hallelujah psalms." Hallelujah literally means "praise ('hallelu') the Lord ('jah')," an abbreviated form for God's name, Yahweh. There are two parts to a praise psalm: (1) a command, which is an invitation to praise the Lord, and (2) a statement of the reason to praise and the content of praise. These two parts help answer three important questions about a praise psalm: Who is praised? Why is God praised? How is God praised?

The authorship and historical setting of the psalms of praise that comprise the focus passages for this session cannot be determined. Most likely they were part of festival worship when all God's people gathered at the Jerusalem temple to celebrate God's sovereignty. It was a very festive yet formal gathering, since the coordination of singing, dancing, and a wide variety of musical instruments was involved. Such festive and powerful praise is more than thanksgiving or a declaration of God's sovereign power. It witnesses to God, who holds past, present, and future together for Israel and the whole creation. Such witness to God, always active in Israel's life, is the power of praise in the psalms.

Psalm 149:1-3 The Lord is maker and ruler

The Lord God is the focus of the entire psalm because only the Lord God made the world (v. 2). It is only God who rules the world (v. 2). Israel is making a statement about all that God has done in the past and is still doing in the present. Psalm 24:1-2, 7-10 is another example of praising God as creator and ruler.

Although Psalm 149 does not use the title “Lord of hosts,” it still recognizes God’s superiority and sovereignty above all other gods and nations. Israel’s election and relationship with the Lord God also inform its future well-being. The God of Israel will execute vengeance on its behalf and will “bind” and defeat all other kings and peoples (vv. 7-8). This is Israel’s security and hope in both the present and the future. This psalm of praise is not a simple thank-you; it is a faithful hymn to God, to God’s faithfulness to Israel, and to God’s ongoing saving lordship in the world.

Psalm 149:4-5, [6-9] The Lord takes pleasure in the people

In verse 4 we have the “why” of praise. Israel praises God because God takes pleasure in God’s people. They are God’s chosen and blessed ones. They are the lowly; that is, they are both faithful to and “humble” before God. Therefore, God will give them victory over their adversaries (vv. 7-9). This victory will give Israel “glory”; that is, the Lord will prove superior to all other gods and will vindicate Israel in the eyes of other nations.

Psalm 150:1-6 All the living praise God!

These six verses include twelve commands to praise God. This is the final “Hallelujah” in this entire book of 150 psalms. Who is praised and why? Praise is given to the God who does mighty and great deeds of creation and salvation (vv. 1-2). Who does the praising? Every breathing thing in the entire world is implored to join in this

resounding hymn (v. 6). This is a vision of how creation is meant to be.

What about the “how”? In verses 3-5 we have what is meant to be an exhaustive list, for that time and place, of all the ways music can serve in praising the Lord. These verses testify to the power of music to help capture the majesty, power, goodness, and transcendence of the Lord God of Israel. Imagine a choir of hundreds singing the “Hallelujah Chorus” at the close of Handel’s *Messiah*. It leaves a person breathless. This music takes us beyond words and any current reality into realms of beauty, majesty, goodness, and salvation. Music is God’s gift to the world. Even a musical genius like Johann Sebastian Bach recognized this when he wrote, “I play the notes as they are written, but it is God who makes the music.” In Psalm 150 Israel is lifted up and enveloped in all the goodness God has done, is doing, and will do in this world and beyond.

The Word Today

Letty was a hardworking farmer, devoted to her family and newly returned to her congregation. She had had a brush with death due to a farm accident. After months of hospitalization and therapy, she and her husband, Will, resolved to worship faithfully at their small, rural congregation. The kids were enrolled in Sunday school, and the oldest began confirmation instruction. Familiar with a dairy farmer’s incredible work schedule, I was surprised to discover Letty in the church about two hours before the service began. Ron, our organist, was practicing in the balcony, unaware of her presence. Letty sat in the last pew on the right side, eyes closed and bathed in the hues of the stained-glass window. As I tried to tiptoe by, she looked up and smiled. “Good morning, Pastor,” she said quietly. “Hello, Letty,” I

whispered. She whispered back, "It's just so beautiful here. I forgot about the change in service time. I'm glad I did. It's been wonderful." The beauty of the place, the music, and the morning light had transformed Letty's time in church. Later she told me that she hadn't felt such peace and hope for a long time.

Maybe you've had an experience like Letty? Found God's peace and hope in music? In worship? In quiet? Or perhaps you found joy and strength in a large assembly of worshipers with hundreds of voices praising God? There is no one way to praise God. The important thing is to praise God, giving God the glory for all God has done, is doing, and will continue to do in order to redeem our lives and our world. Hymns and psalms can also express the difficulty and pain in life. The psalms contain almost every human emotion imaginable. All are helpful ways to focus on God, who creates, forgives, and saves. In such worship God lifts us outside ourselves and wraps us in God's goodness and love.

One of my favorite hymns is "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" by Charles Wesley. I think it captures the message and tone of Psalm 150. When singing this during worship, I usually close my eyes and just listen to the congregation sing the fourth verse: "Finish then thy new creation . . ." It's transporting to rejoice in God bringing all creation to its perfection and glory.

Do you have a favorite hymn of praise or piece of instrumental music that allows you to glorify God and give thanks for all that God has done and is doing in your life?

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. What does the word *praise* mean to you?

Exploring the Word

1. Describe the festival gathering of Israel in Psalms 149 and 150.
2. Compare Psalm 149:1-3 and Psalm 24:1-2, 7-10. How do they answer the question "Who is God?"
3. Why does Israel praise God (149:4-5)?
4. Contrast Psalm 149:6-9 with Psalm 150:6. How do Matthew 26:52 and 28:19-20 help us to understand the will and work of God?
5. How does Psalm 150:3-5 help answer the question, How is God to be praised? Based on all of Psalm 150, what is the full meaning of Israel's faith experience in this festival worship?

The Word Today

1. On the line below, mark where you would place yourself regarding your preference for meaningful worship and praise:

Quiet/meditative

Dancing and cymbals

Does this vary depending on the occasion (for example, funeral, wedding, baptism)?

2. Do you identify with Letty's experience? Why or why not?

3. Do music and hymn-singing lift you up out of yourself and into God's love? If so, why and when?

Closing Prayer

Thank you, God, for the gift of music. Lead us to praise you together, offering our voices and whole selves. Lift us up so our hearts are fixed on you and your grace. In praise and music may we find the goodness, purpose, and peace you so graciously give to all who gather in your name. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Further Study

Psalm 96; Ephesians 5:15-20

Daily Readings

M. Psalm 147:1-7

F. Colossians 3:12-17

T. 1 Samuel 16:14-23

S. Psalm 149

W. Acts 16:23-26

S. Psalm 150

T. Psalm 148

Memorization

Psalm 150:6a

Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!

All People Praise God

Revelation 7:9-17

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,

¹² singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴ I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple,