

His Praise Endures Forever

Series: Patterns For Prayer

by Steve Zeisler

It's difficult to think of a context in which the word "forever" can be used meaningfully that isn't related to the things of God. We occasionally hear the word "forever" or "eternal" used in ordinary conversation, perhaps in advertising. But you can't really speak of something lasting forever that does not name the name of God or partake of his life. Everything else around us is mutable. Relationships undergo change, sometimes joyfully, sometimes painfully. The Soviet Empire lasted 70 years and has now collapsed. We have seen our church undergo change in its leadership in the last two or three years. Our house is probably going to need painting this summer, and it seems to me that it was just yesterday that we painted it. Clothing and furniture wear out. The 49ers couldn't even three-- peat! Nothing stays the same except in the Scriptures, where we discover that the word "forever" is appropriate.

Hallelujah!

Today I would like us to consider Psalm 111 in our series on learning to pray. This psalm begins with the magnificent Hebrew word *hallelujah*, which means "praise the Lord." The psalm ends with the phrase, "His praise endures forever." Now, the NIV says, "To him belongs eternal praise," but that is slightly misleading. It is true that he will always deserve praise, but that isn't the point the psalmist is making here. The point is that when his praise is uttered from the heart, it lasts forever. A shout in a cave does not vanish into the air as quickly as a shout made in an open field. It echoes and lasts longer as a result. This verse suggests that, in some sense, genuine praise never "vanishes from the air," becoming instead part of an everlasting song offered by the creation to the Creator. Psalm 111:

Praise the Lord.

**I will extol the LORD with all my heart
in the council of the upright and in the assembly.
Great are the works of the LORD;
they are pondered by all who delight in them.
Glorious and majestic are his deeds,
and his righteousness endures forever.
He has caused his wonders to be remembered;
the Lord is gracious and compassionate.
He provides food for those who fear him;
he remembers his covenant forever.
He has shown his people the power of his works,
giving them the lands of other nations.
The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.
They are steadfast for ever and ever,
done in faithfulness and uprightness.
He provided redemption for his people;
he ordained his covenant forever
-- holy and awesome is his name.
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
all who follow his precepts have good understanding.
To him belongs eternal praise [His praise endures forever].**

This psalm is one of a handful that are written as acrostics in Hebrew. The first letter of each of the 22 lines of this poem, when read in sequence, spell out the Hebrew alphabet. Alphabetization encouraged memorizing scripture, and the psalmist was obviously attempting to build this device into his poetry to help people

remember it. Because the psalm has this structure, the ideas don't proceed in a logical order; the psalmist is not building one idea upon another. He has a general theme, and he comes at it wave upon wave, using the alphabet to organize and build the poem. So I want to comment generally about a number of the features of this psalm rather than taking it verse by verse.

We need to be captured
by the truth-- not just
know it, but embrace it

Verse 1, as we've already said, calls upon us to "praise the Lord." The psalmist takes up his own calling by saying, "I will extol the Lord with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly." He recognizes from the very beginning that praise which is merely a formality, given as some kind of external offering, is not what God wants. He wants us to praise or extol him, to understand him and articulate his glory, and he wants it to come from the heart. It should matter to us not just what we say, but what we believe. We need to be captured by the truth-- not just know it, but embrace it. So he is saying, "I will do what I say others should do. I will extol the Lord with all my heart."

The council and assembly

Then he says that it is "in the council of the upright and in the assembly" that he will offer his heartfelt praise. The council of the upright is a small band of people, a family or a friendship circle. The word is sometimes even translated "friendship." It means people that you know well enough to understand and care about. Perhaps you can imagine a group sitting around a campfire, holding hands and singing the praises of the Lord. Heartfelt praise ought to take place when brothers and sisters who know and love each other meet together.

This psalm recognizes that God's works should be remembered, and for that reason it has always been associated with Passover. The Jews were commanded at Passover to remember the extraordinary business of how God saved them from Egypt. At the Last Supper Jesus met with his disciples and they celebrated the Passover together. He taught them, washed their feet, wept with them, and opened the future to them. All that took place (after Judas left) in a friendship circle of 12 brothers, a council of the upright. It says that afterward they sang a hymn (like Psalm 111) together and then went out into the night.

It is also appropriate that God be praised "in the assembly," that is, a large congregation formed when all the people of the Lord meet-- those whose names you know and those you don't know. The assembly could be as large as the entire nation of Israel or the size of the congregation that meets here. But it has in mind many voices taking up the theme of praising God.

Beauty in nature

Verses 2 and following repeatedly bring out the idea that God is active. Verse 2 speaks of the works of the Lord; verse 3, majestic deeds; verse 4, wonders or wonderful works; verse 6, his works; and verse 7, the works of his hands. There are different Hebrew terms used in these phrases, that suggest we focus on different aspects of God's activity. The term "wonders" which verse 4 calls on us to remember, call to mind the startling power and beauty of nature. Paul makes the point in Romans that if we can interact with creation at all we can begin to understand the Creator. We also learn of God as he acts in human history. And finally, we learn of God as he acts in caring for individuals. So let's take a moment and think about what we're told in this psalm about these three spheres of the activity of God.

The created world exists in large measure to declare the nature of its Creator, and we should be sighting God everywhere as we make our way through the created world, from the majesty of the mountains to the beauty of a tiny flower, or perhaps in the extraordinary business of the seasons as they go by. Bill Conner wrote of the dawn and the sunset in one of the songs we sang this morning. All those things ought to remind us of the one who made them, either in their terrible power or in their wonderful beauty, as well as everything in between. Rich Kitson told me this morning that he was looking up here while I was preaching, and one of the microphones was twisted so that it was aimed at the flowers. He thought, "Maybe the flowers are supposed to speak into the microphone and say something of the glory of God." He had the right idea, didn't he? These

flowers are here to tell us something about the one who makes them.

Annie Dillard is a Christian poet and author who lived on a creek in Pennsylvania for a year. In her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she wrote about her experience of living in the natural world:

If the landscape reveals one certainty, it is that the extravagant gesture is the very stuff of creation. After the one extravagant gesture of creation in the first place, the universe has continued to deal exclusively in extravagances, flinging intricacies and colossi down aeons of emptiness, heaping profusions on profligacies with ever-fresh vigor. The whole has been on fire from the word go. I come down to the water to cool my eyes. But everywhere I look I see fire; and that which isn't flint is tinder, and the whole world sparks and flames.

She is just walking by the creek and seeing that the whole thing is on fire! Creation is alive and it's vital, and, as she says farther on, "the Creator loves pizzazz." That's a glorious insight She's praising God by seeing him in the world that he's created. It's a thoughtful, intelligent word of praise, a well-- crafted one. Most of us aren't poetic enough to write like that, but we can see some of the same things, and be moved by them.

Lord of history

We ought also to be about the business of seeing God in history. What is he doing with the events of the world? Nations rise and fall. Powerful individuals swell and then are reduced to nothing. Economic battles take place between continents, peoples, and cultures. Do we see God at work in that? Do we see what Dick Haines saw when he read in Jeremiah about Judah's 70 -- year captivity in Babylon? Now he's going to the Soviet Union and asking what is happening at the end of this 70 -- year run among the atheists of the communist world. Do we see God at work in history? We should.

The psalm draws some conclusion about the nature of God from his works in history. Verse 4 says that the Lord is gracious and compassionate. Now, if we look and listen ten carefully, watch him at work, think about what he's done, and recall how he has cared for his people, we can say something about what he's like. We can say that he is by nature gracious, compassionate, and personal. He is interested in folks like us. He is specifically pouring out his goodness to those he loves, benefiting us. We can learn that about God by looking at his activity.

Verse 9 speaks a bit about additional things we can conclude about God as well: "holy and awesome is his name." The one who is compassionate and gracious on the one hand is also infinitely holy, pure, righteous, overwhelming, and awesome. We learn that by watching him at work: in his refusal to abide sin, and in the authority by which he judges throughout history. We can learn things about God by looking for him in history.

In verse 5 we see one end of a spectrum, provision of food for those who fear him. "Daily bread" is the phrase Jesus used. We learn something about God by having the meals he provides today. At the other end of the spectrum, in verse 6 we see him overthrowing nations, giving lands and territories to his own people. The involvement of God in history-- his actions and his purposes being worked out-- is an extraordinary business.

Eugene Peterson has written of the God who rules in the affairs of cultures and nations. He says this:

Take a long, scrutinizing look at what God is doing. This requires patient attentiveness and energetic concentration. Everybody else is noisier than God. The headlines and neon lights and amplifying systems of the world announce human works, but what of God's works? They are unadvertised but also inescapable if we simply look. They are everywhere, they are marvelous. But God has no public relations agency. He mounts no publicity campaign to get our attention. He simply invites us to look. Prayer is looking at the works of the Lord.

This God whom we serve, whose praise we are to speak, invites us to see him in the created world and in human history.

God's handiwork

In verse 7 we find that the works of his hands are faithful and just. In verse 8 his precepts are trustworthy, steadfast forever, and done in faithfulness and uprightness. "Obeyed in faithfulness and uprightness" is the best way to translate that. What are the works that specifically involve God's hands- his handiwork? If you think of the first two chapters of Genesis where everything began, most of creation came into being at his word. The light and the darkness, the orbs of the heavens, the sea, the land, the fish, the beasts, the creeping things, the domesticated animals, the flowering, the Avers. He spoke and it was so. But the thing he did with his hands, the creative act in which he invested himself personally and touched his creation was the making of human beings. We can imagine his face in close observation, making the best, highest, most important thing in creation. The work of his hands is the work of making people what they ought to be. That's why in verses 7 and 8, when the psalmist is speaking of the handiwork of God, he talks about God's precepts, his judgments. beyond the creation of our physical bodies, what he is forming in us is our character. That is the creative work that's taking place. He's making us the kind of people we ought to be on the inside. He's fixing all the rough spots and the things that are out of joint. He's shining light where there hasn't been any. He's telling the truth; the precepts of God are stable, sure, and trustworthy, and by them he makes us what we ought to be. Do you see God at work there? Do you have a word of praise for him because of what he's doing in redemption, the remaking of people like us? We can see God in all the remarkable beauty, storms, and power of the created world. We can see God at work in history if we'll look. And we can see God at work with his hands, making people like us.

Responses to God's work

Now, we're going to end focused on prayer again, because we're hoping to learn to pray. But there are some other things here that I think are worth mentioning, specific responses that are highlighted that we can take note of and find useful. I want to take us back through the psalm again and look at the words that indicate the responses people make to the observation of his accomplishments. What kinds of things does the psalmist talk about that we might choose to do? In verse 2 he speaks of pondering or studying the works of God. Do you and I take time to study either the creation or human history, to learn something, to wrestle with it mentally, in such a way that we see God and find ourselves reaming from him? It's a worthy endeavor. become a student of the Bible, the newspaper, the natural world. Become a student of your neighbor, your family members. Begin to ask yourself, "What can I learn here if I look carefully?"

Verse 4 uses the word "remember." The Jews were told to remember the Exodus, their salvation from Egypt, year after year, by celebrating the Passover. We're told the same thing by our Lord as we take communion together; we are to remember the cross of Christ and what price he paid for our lives.

Verses 5 and 10 both mention the fear or reverence of the Lord. Perhaps we might show this in time spent on our knees, or time where we don't speak, we just listen, in recognition that our God is an awesome God. He deserves reverence and holy silence from us.

This God whom we serve, whose praise we are to speak, invites us to see him in the created world and in human history

Verse 8 comments on obedience. The precepts of the Lord are trustworthy, faithful, and just, and they are to be accomplished in faithfulness and uprightness. It has the idea that we make a choice to obey what we hear and learn from him.

Lastly, I would call your attention to verse 10 where we see a process. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding." Both wisdom and understanding grow from a fear of the Lord, following his precepts in obedience. We make choices before God in such a way that we revere him. We hear his calling and precepts and obey them, and as a result we grow in our understanding. We become thoughtful; we have insight; a depth of wisdom takes place. And it is that wisdom that praises God.

This psalm begins with hallelujah, praise the Lord. It ends with the announcement, "His praise endures

forever." But the praise that endures forever, the praise that is most worthy, is that praise which takes time to think and learn, which obeys, which sees deeply into the person and work of the Lord.

Praise with understanding

There's a phenomenon among us contemporary evangelicals that is shallow, to be honest. It speaks of God inhabiting his praises, and there's a routine recitation of the simplest phraseology over and over again that is assumed to be praise of the Lord. But that isn't what this psalm is teaching at all. It's talking about looking and listening, thinking and learning, being captivated, being made wise and understanding, being changed by what we learn so that the praise that we have to offer, like that of Annie Dillard or Eugene Peterson, says something. We're speaking back to God his wonders and glories, and we're doing it having learned something in the process, having grown up. If you have children, you know they thank God for lollipops and video games, and that is appropriate for them. But eventually we want to be able to speak more profoundly of the one who is making us mature, don't we? That is the point of verse 10. It is the fear of the Lord that brings about the wisdom which in turn is able to articulate the praise that reverberates throughout the universe forever.

We live in a world that is shaky. We don't know when the next earthquake will hit or when there will be another upheaval in some area of our life that we can't predict. On the other hand, we certainly can predict that our bodies will change and deteriorate over time. We live in a world in which everything changes, but as we learn to pray as this psalm calls forth prayer, we are engaging in something that doesn't change. Why be caught up with other things? Why be so fascinated by things that will fade by next week? Or why give so much energy, anxiety, and money to ideas that we're embarrassed about because we can't even recall them a month hence, so temporary are they in nature. Seeing the works of God, penetrating into some understanding of him, and speaking back to him his glories will last forever.

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Steve Zeisler
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