

THE GOD WHO STOOPS

SERIES: THE HEART OF THE PSALMS

By Scott Grant

Time and space

Two dimensions rule our lives: time and space. We occupy space, and we live in time, but both dimensions limit us. We can't go back or forward in time, though we can't keep from writing fantastic stories about such possibilities. We can't do everything we'd like to do, because time forbids us. We can only be in one place at one time. We'd like to break the borders of space, so that we have more of it, and more freedom within it.

We get uncomfortable when someone messes with our time and space. Much to our chagrin, we cannot rule time and space. On the contrary, they rule us.

We might like to know, then, that there is a God who rules the rulers. Psalm 113 declares the Lord to be the ruler of time and space. We also might like to know what the Lord does in time and space, and the psalmist has something to say about this as well.

Psalm 113 is a psalm of praise. It climaxes in verse 5, which comprises the two central lines in the psalm. The implications of verse 5 for humanity, illustrated in the verses 6 through 9, provide for a surprising—and uplifting—twist.

Praise the LORD!

Praise, O servants of the LORD,

Praise the name of the LORD.

Blessed be the name of the LORD

From this time forth and forever.

From the rising of the sun to its setting

The name of the LORD is to be praised.

The LORD is high above all nations;

His glory is above the heavens.

Who is like the LORD our God,

Who is enthroned on high,

Who humbles Himself to behold

The things that are in heaven and in the earth?

He raises the poor from the dust

And lifts the needy from the ash heap,

To make them sit with princes,

With the princes of His people.

He makes the barren woman abide in the house

As a joyful mother of children.

Praise the LORD!

Praise for the Lord's name (1-2)

The words “praise the Lord” translate the familiar Hebrew word “halleluiah.” The word is a combination of the Hebrew word “praise” and a shortened form YHWH, the personal name of the Lord.

The “servants of the Lord” are the target of the psalmist’s exhortation. The term is a way of referring to the people of God with particular reference to those who have remained loyal to him. Serving the Lord not only involves obedience to him but worship of him. Praising the Lord is a way of serving him, and words of praise are called forth from those who claim allegiance to the Lord.

Servants are not only to praise the Lord but also to praise his name. When the name of the Lord is invoked in worship, it’s a reminder to worshipers that the Lord is present even though he can’t be seen. When the Lord revealed his name to the people of Israel, he revealed himself. The meaning of the name, “He Is” or “He Will Be,” in itself speaks of the Lord’s self-revelation. As the Lord made his covenant with Israel, the name took on added significance. The Lord was, and would be, with his people. When Israelites praise the name of the Lord, they are praising him for his faithfulness, among other attributes.

In verse 2 the psalmist changes verb forms, although he still uses the language of command. The command, however, is more indirect. The wording gives prominence to the name of the Lord.

If the command to praise to Lord happened to cause the worshiper to focus on himself, and on his ability to praise the Lord, the command to “let the name of the Lord be blessed” would turn his attention from himself to the praiseworthy nature of the Lord. The psalmist expects the name of the Lord, when properly understood, to generate its own praise. With such wording, the psalmist himself expresses the value he attaches to the Lord’s name. He cares so much for the Lord’s name that he wants it to be recognized and praised.

The worship word that the psalmist uses in verse 2, “blessed,” conveys the concept of praise with a specific emphasis on thankfulness for the Lord’s blessings.

The name of the Lord was praised long before the psalmist penned this composition. Nevertheless, he expresses the desire that his words of exhortation would be in a sense a new starting point, gathering up more praises that inspire ensuing generations and never-ending worship. The psalmist envisions no terminus to the worship of the Lord.

Focusing on his name

We must remind ourselves that the Lord is present with us when we worship even though we can’t see him. Although we can’t see him, he has revealed himself to us in a way that shows us that he is, and will be, with us. He will never leave us nor forsake us.

Of course, we should praise him for who he is, but praise eventually becomes burdensome if we're trying to find it in ourselves. It's at this point that we should stop trying so hard to praise the Lord and simply focus on his name: who he is in his faithfulness to us. The Lord's name tends to generate its own praise.

If the Lord's name prompts us to give him praise, then our words, like the psalmist's can form a new starting point for worship, inspiring more intense worship, both for ourselves and for others, that extends into eternity.

God of time and space (3-4)

In some ways verse 3 mirrors verse 2, both in wording and theme. Both verses speak of the extent of praise. In both cases, the object of praise is the name of the Lord. The psalmist in verse 2 intends the praise of the Lord to continue through time. In verse 3, however, he shifts his attention to space.

Also, he shifts from the language of command to the language of statement. Literally, "the name of the Lord is praised." He is not commanding anyone to praise the Lord; he's simply stating a fact.

Such praise occurs "from the rising of the sun to its setting," a poetic way of conveying universality. There is no part of the earth where the name of the Lord is not praised.

This raises the question: Who, or what, is doing the praising in all these places? Malachi, echoing verse 3, envisions a time when the Lord will be praised among the Gentiles, "from the rising of the sun, even to its setting" (Malachi 1:11). When the Lord finally renews creation and his people, the prophecy of Malachi will be decidedly fulfilled.

Perhaps it was even true in the day of the psalmist, even though the Lord's worshipers had not spread out to cover all the earth. Creation praises the Lord where humans do not. After all, Jesus told the Pharisees that if humans stopped praising him, "the stones will cry out" (Luke 19:40).

The fact that the Lord is praised from east to west is incentive to heed the commands of verses 1 and 2. To praise the Lord is not something that is out of step with what's happening throughout the world. It is, in fact, perfectly in keeping with what many people are doing, what all creation is doing, and what all humans who become part of God's renewed creation will do forever. It is what humans were made to do.

In verse 4, the psalmist continues to write in spatial terms, but now instead of looking from east to west, he looks up. He shifts from horizontal space to vertical space. Again, as in verse 3, he uses the language of statement. He uses terms of height to convey the superiority of the Lord.

He is high above all nations. Every human nation, and every human, is inferior to the Lord. The Lord is not only above the nations, which are on earth, but he is above the heavens, which the

pagan nations worshiped; the Lord is above that which the pagans worshiped. Again, the contrast conveys universality. The Lord is superior to anything on earth or in the heavens.

Like verse 3, verse 4 contains no command to praise the Lord. But like verse 3, verse 4 offers incentive to praise the Lord.

In harmony with God's design

Cast your gaze to the east and then to the west. Men and women everywhere, and even creation itself, are praising the name of the Lord day-to-day. If you praise the name of the Lord where we live, you may feel out of step with your world. You may feel as if you're the out-of-tune key on the piano. But what you're doing is in perfect harmony with God's design for humanity and for all creation.

Now look up. You can't begin to see the end of the heavens. The Lord, in his glory, dwells above and beyond the heavens. Know that he is superior to anything and anyone, be it human or another would-be god.

Men and women tend to take umbrage when told of a higher authority. Therefore, they do what their ancestors did: In one way or another they build a tower to crash the gates of heaven and take over (Genesis 11:1-9). But as it says in another psalm, "He who sits in the heavens laughs"—and, no doubt, weeps (Psalm 2:4, Mark 3:5).

The Lord is the God of time and space, worthy of praise at all times and forever in every square inch of the universe. When we praise the Lord, we are participating in something that is happening everywhere and something that will happen forever.

The Lord stoops (5-6)

The psalmist asks the central question of poetic literature: "Who is like the Lord?" The question, or at least the beginning of the question in verse 5, also is central to the Psalm 113, both structurally and thematically. Verse 5 is the exact center point of the psalm. The question is the counterbalance to the poetic lament, "How long, O Lord?"

The second line of verse 5 echoes verse 4. If the Lord's glory is above the heavens, it follows that he would be "enthroned on high," reigning over all creation.

In verse 6 the psalmist describes what the Lord does from his lofty dwelling place. At this point the psalm, immediately after its climax, takes a surprising—and downward—turn. The Lord is high and lofty, but he, literally, "stoops down to behold." He is not only so "high" that he has to "stoop down" to see what's happening in his creation, *he actually concerns himself with stooping down.*

The imagery is suggestive of a God who is not "above it all" but one who is concerned with the things of earth. Not only that, the Lord can see so low because he is enthroned so high. His

loftiness implies not aloofness but involvement. In theological terms, the Lord is both transcendent and immanent—far away and close at hand.

The second line of verse 6 simply reads, “In heaven and in earth.” It more likely concerns the sphere of the question posed in verse 5: Who is like the Lord our God...in heaven and in the earth?” The answer, of course, is no one. No one else, and no other god—either in heaven, or on earth—is enthroned so high and looks down so low.

The Lord is involved

The psalmist has set us up to be surprised by his downward turn in verse 6. And well we should be. It should still take us by surprise, at least occasionally, that this God has anything to do with us. And let’s face it: Sometimes we’re not sure he cares all that much. On the one hand, we think he won’t bother us if we do whatever we want. On the other hand, we don’t think he’ll help us if we get into a jam. What we experience in life seems, sometimes, to validate such conceptions. Yet the psalmist speaks of a God who is involved.

This is not the God of the deists, who think of God as having very little to do with things on earth. This is not the God of the dualists, who think what can be seen and touched doesn’t really matter. This is the God of Israel, the Creator God, who cares deeply about what he has created. This is not God as we sometimes conceive of him—distant, uncaring and uninvolved.

A chaplain at Oxford had a standard response to freshmen who told him that he wouldn’t be seeing much of them because they didn’t believe in God. He asked them which God they didn’t believe in. They usually described a distant God who wasn’t much involved in the world. He would then respond, “I don’t believe in that God either.” The God of the scriptures is intimately involved in his creation and his creatures. Not even one sparrow falls to the ground apart from the Lord (Matthew 10:29).

But we’re left with two questions. If the Lord sees what’s going on here, does he act? And if he acts, how does he act?

The Lord helps the lowly (7-9)

Indeed, the Lord acts: He acts on behalf of the poor, the needy and the barren woman. These all occupy, and in some way represent, the lower strata of society. The Lord, who is enthroned on high, *stoops down* to act on behalf of the lowest of the low.

The second line of verse 7 is an intensification of the first line. The “needy” are in a worse class than the “poor,” who may or may not be in need. Proverbially, the abode of the needy is the ash heap, a worse place to live than the dust, the dwelling place of the poor. In intervening on behalf of the poor, the Lord stoops. In intervening on behalf of the needy, he stoops lower.

The Lord intervenes on behalf of the poor and needy in a remarkable way. He raises and lifts them up from their lowly dwelling places to make them sit with the princes of his people. The

Lord turns outcasts into royalty. They go from groveling to sitting comfortably—and sitting on thrones, no less. In heaven, the Lord is enthroned. On earth, he enthrones the lowly.

This is not to say, of course, that he makes all the poor and needy sit with the princes of his people. It is to say that this is something he is inclined to do. It is to say that he is concerned for the lowly and acts on their behalf, sometimes in quite astonishing ways.

The final “lowly” person who benefits from the Lord’s intervention is the barren woman. Here, the beneficiary is a specific individual, not a category of people such as the poor and the needy. As such, the barren woman stands for all the poor and needy, for all those who identify with her lowly state.

Mothers were honored, but barren women were dishonored. Literally, the Lord “settles” the barren woman in the house. As a barren woman, she’s unsettled, even in her house. As the Lord opens her womb and grants not just a child but children, he gives her a home in her house. He honors her as a woman. Verses 7 through 9 are based on the experience of Hannah, a barren woman whose womb was opened by the Lord. In verses 7 through 8a, the psalmist is actually repeating the words of Hannah’s prayer of thanksgiving after she gave birth to Samuel (1 Samuel 2:8). The nation Israel saw itself as poor, needy and barren, but the Lord intervened for her.

Here, then, is what the Lord of time and space does in time and space. He lifts up the lowly. He creates for them surprising possibilities. It is amazing what one so high does for one so low.

The psalmist closes with his opening exhortation, “Praise the Lord.” But now, we know why. The Lord is worthy of praise based on what he does for the needy, the poor and the barren woman.

In this psalm, the Lord can be seen in two places: above the heavens and with the lowly. The Lord says of himself:

“I dwell on a high and holy place,
And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit
In order to revive the spirit of the lowly
And to revive the heart of the contrite.” (Isaiah 57:15)

The Lord does seem partial to the lowly.

The desperately needy: Us

We must see ourselves as lowly, for the Lord is not impartial. He favors the lowly.

If you have money, don’t let it fool you. If you’re needs are being met, don’t be deceived. If your world honors you, don’t boast. You’re still desperately needy. We came from dust, and we will return to dust. We may live in a mansion, but one day it will be an ash heap. We may take pride in our status, but pride goes before the fall.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit”—in other words, blessed are those who have understood their spiritual poverty, need and barrenness (Matthew 5:3). As the people of God, we are the barren woman (Isaiah 54:1, Galatians 4:26-27). Blessed are those who understand their desperate need for God to stoop down and act on their behalf.

If God does not act on our behalf, we’re lost, because we’re all poor, needy and barren. If he does not raise us from the dust, if he does not lift us from the ash heap, if he does not take away our shame, we are lost. We are all the lowest of the low, every one of us. And until we recognize that, we will never be able to see God stooping down to help us. Indeed, we may not even allow it.

Some connect with their desperate state on a daily and ongoing basis because of their particular challenges. Others understand their neediness on a seasonal basis, when presented with a particular challenge. All of us, though, receive daily, if not debilitating reminders about our needy state. When, if for a moment, or for a day or two, a need that we can’t meet overwhelms us, God is speaking to us, reminding us of our humble state. If you are the lowest of the low, and you are, then you’re life is full of possibility. The Lord, who dwells above the heavens, stoops down to help you.

Together as a church, we are the poor, the needy and the barren. We need God to intervene. We need him to lift us to raise us from the dust, lift us from the ash heap and settle us a joyful mother of children.

From heaven to earth

Mary was a young girl from Nazareth who would not have been honored in her world. She was among the poor, the needy and the barren, so to speak. She was a nobody from nowhere. Yet the angel Gabriel appeared to her and told her, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” The greeting perplexed her. The Lord favored *her*, a young girl from Nazareth? The Lord was with *her*? Well, yes. The Lord favors girls such as her. The greeting meant that she would be the mother of the Messiah.

In words that awaken Hannah’s prayer, which itself found its way into Psalm 113, Mary responded (Luke 1:46-49):

“My soul exalts the Lord
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.
For He has had regard for the humble state of his bondslave;
For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.
For the Mighty One has done great things for me;
And holy is his name.”

The Lord raised her, lifted her and made her a joyful mother—the joyful mother of the Messiah, no less.

And who was the Messiah? Shockingly, he was God himself, born as a human in a manger for animals. He stooped that low, to raise not only Mary but also all of us who identify with her humble state. When he became an adult, he went around loving, healing and blessing the lowly.

If you want to rescue someone from the miry clay, you can't very well shout instructions from outside the pit. You're going to have to get yourself muddy—and risk getting stuck yourself. God got himself muddy. As the Son of Man, he became poor, with no place to lay his head (Matthew 8:20). He became needy, crying out to the Father in desperation, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). He became the barren woman, wanting to gather the children of Jerusalem the way a hen gathers her chicks, but they were unwilling (Matthew 23:27).

He got himself muddy, and he got stuck—stuck on a cross, cast aside as poor, needy and barren by the ones he came to save. Yet the Father raised him from the dead, granting him heavenly riches, meeting his need and giving him countless children. He became what we are that we might become what he is: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Because God showed up in the dung-filled manger of Bethlehem and on the desolate cross of Jerusalem, we know there's no place he won't go. He'll show up on any pile of dust, on any ash heap or in any womb—even yours. The Lord creates astonishing possibilities for those of us who see ourselves as poor, needy and barren.

Shout for joy

The psalmist began by exhorting us to praise the Lord for his loftiness. He finishes by exhorting us to praise the Lord for his lowliness. We praise the Lord of time and space for what he does in time and space. He stoops down to help us.

“Shout for joy, O barren one, you who have borne no child;
Break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud, you who have not travailed;
For the sons of the desolate one will be more numerous
Than the sons of the married woman,” says the Lord. (Isaiah 54:1)

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