

SESSION ONE - PRAISE

Psalm 118

1 Give thanks to the LORD, because he is good, **and his love is eternal.**
2 Let the people of Israel say, **“His love is eternal.”**
3 Let the priests of God say, **“His love is eternal.”**
4 Let all who worship him say, **“His love is eternal.”**
5 In my distress I called to the LORD; he answered me and set me free.
6 **The LORD is with me, I will not be afraid; what can anyone do to me?**
7 It is the LORD who helps me, **and I will see my enemies defeated.**
8 It is better to trust in the LORD than to depend on people.
9 **It is better to trust in the LORD than to depend on human leaders.**
10 Many enemies were around me; but I destroyed them by the power of the LORD!
11 **They were around me on every side; but I destroyed them by the power of the LORD!**
12 They swarmed around me like bees, but they burned out as quickly as a brush fire; by the power of the LORD I destroyed them.
13 **I was fiercely attacked and was being defeated, but the LORD helped me.**
14 **The LORD makes me powerful and strong; he has saved me.**
15 Listen to the glad shouts of victory in the tents of God's people:
“The LORD's mighty power has done it!
16 His power has brought us victory - **his mighty power in battle!”**
17 I will not die; instead, I will live and proclaim what the LORD has done.
18 **He has punished me severely, but he has not let me die.**
19 Open to me the gates of the Temple; I will go in and give thanks to the LORD!
20 **This is the gate of the LORD; only the righteous can come in.**
21 I praise you, LORD, because you heard me, **because you have given me victory.**

22 The stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all.
23 **This was done by the LORD; what a wonderful sight it is!**
24 This is the day of the LORD's victory; **let us be happy, let us celebrate!**
25 Save us, LORD, save us! **Give us success, O LORD!**
26 May God bless the one who comes in the name of the LORD!
From the Temple of the LORD we bless you.
27 The LORD is God; **he has been good to us.**
With branches in your hands, start the festival and march around the altar.
28 You are my God, and I give you thanks; **I will proclaim your greatness.**
29 Give thanks to the LORD, because he is good, **and his love is eternal.**

Psalm 150

Praise the LORD! Praise God in his Temple!

Praise his strength in heaven!

Praise him for the mighty things he has done.

Praise his supreme greatness.

Praise him with trumpets.

Praise him with harps and lyres.

Praise him with drums and dancing.

Praise him with harps and flutes.

Praise him with cymbals.

Praise him with loud cymbals.

Praise the LORD, all living creatures!

Praise the Lord!

² Good News Translation (GNT)

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Dictionary definitions:

express warm approval or admiration of.

commend, express approval of, express admiration for, applaud, pay tribute to, speak highly of, eulogize, compliment, congratulate, celebrate, sing the praises of, praise to the skies, rave about, go into raptures about, heap praise on, wax lyrical about, say nice things about, make much of, pat on the back, take one's hat off to, throw bouquets at, lionize, admire, hail, cheer, flatter, panegyricize.

e.g. "we can't praise Chris enough—he did a brilliant job"; "the police praised Parveen for her courage"

express one's respect and gratitude towards (a deity), especially in song.

worship, glorify, honour, exalt, adore, pay tribute to, pay homage to, give thanks to, venerate, reverence, hallow, bless, laud, magnify.

e.g. "we praise God for past blessings"

Some Thoughts: David Warrington

I have never forgotten the film “Bedazzled” which was Peter Cook and Dudley Moore updating the story of Faust into London in the swinging 60s. Cook played the Devil and in one scene he gets up on a red post box and tries to explain to Moon (the Moore character) what praising God was like for him, Lucifer – the loveliest angel of them all. Moon says “What do I do?” Cook replies “Well, sort of dance around praising me, mainly...” and goes on to say that he should say things like how good, wise and handsome he is. After a while doing this Moon says “Here, I'm getting a bit bored with this. Can't we change places?” to which the Devil pithily replies: “That's exactly how I felt.” I suspect many people today feel the same as Moon did about what goes on in church under the name of praising God. Songs and hymns constantly repeating the themes of God's goodness, wisdom and beauty until it becomes somewhat boring. Charismatic renewal sought to reimagine praise as a place of encounter with the reality of the divine but much modern charismatic worship slips back

into the constant repeating of themes regarding God's power and Christ's triumphal reign. Traditionally Christian praise and worship have been seen as the place in the life of the Church where God is known and encountered through Word and Sacrament, the place where Jesus the Christ comes alive for us and through that mutual engagement our lives are changed and we become more like him for the sake of a world that needs the love of God. The defining character of our praise, then, is not the style we use (be it ‘High’ church or ‘Low’, music that is modern or traditional) but whether the Christ of God is encountered in the midst. Such a place of encounter should never truly be boring.

Questions:

- Our worship often opens with praise. What happens when we praise God?
- Does God need our praises? Do we need to express our praise?
- What are the different ways in which we can express our praise of God?
- Does praise have an impact on the way we live our lives?
- Does praising God do anything to help others or to change the world in which we live?
- How do the ‘Hosannas’ of Holy Week contrast with the Good Friday cries of ‘Crucify’?

SESSION TWO- LAMENT

Psalm 22 NRSV 1-19

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? ² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

³ Yet you are holy, **enthroned on the praises of Israel.**

⁴ In you our ancestors trusted; **they trusted, and you delivered them.**

⁵ To you they cried, and were saved;

in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

⁶ But I am a worm, and not human;

scorned by others, and despised by the people.

⁷ All who see me mock at me;

they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;

⁸ ‘Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!’

⁹ Yet it was you who took me from the womb;

you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.

¹⁰ On you I was cast from my birth,

and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

¹¹ Do not be far from me, **for trouble is near and there is no one to help.**

¹² Many bulls encircle me, **strong bulls of Bashan surround me;**

¹³ they open wide their mouths at me, **like a ravening and roaring lion.**

¹⁴ I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint;

my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast;

¹⁵ my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws;

you lay me in the dust of death.

¹⁶ For dogs are all around me; **a company of evildoers encircles me.**

My hands and feet have shrivelled; ¹⁷ I can count all my bones.

They stare and gloat over me;

¹⁸ they divide my clothes among themselves,

and for my clothing they cast lots.

¹⁹ But you, O LORD, do not be far away!

O my help, come quickly to my aid!

Psalm 88 NRSV

¹ O LORD, God of my salvation,

when, at night, I cry out in your presence,

² **let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.**

³ For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.

⁴ **I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;**

I am like those who have no help,

⁵ like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave,

like those whom you remember no more,

for they are cut off from your hand.

⁶ **You have put me in the depths of the Pit,**

in the regions dark and deep.

⁷ Your wrath lies heavy upon me,

and you overwhelm me with all your waves.

⁸ **You have caused my companions to shun me;**

you have made me a thing of horror to them.

I am shut in so that I cannot escape;

⁹ my eye grows dim through sorrow.

Every day I call on you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you.

¹⁰ **Do you work wonders for the dead?**

Do the shades rise up to praise you?

¹¹ Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,

or your faithfulness in Abaddon?

¹² **Are your wonders known in the darkness,**

or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?

¹³ But I, O LORD, cry out to you;

in the morning my prayer comes before you.

¹⁴ **O LORD, why do you cast me off?**

Why do you hide your face from me?

¹⁵ Wretched and close to death from my youth up,

I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.

¹⁶ **Your wrath has swept over me;**

your dread assaults destroy me.

¹⁷ They surround me like a flood all day long;

from all sides they close in on me.

¹⁸ **You have caused friend and neighbour to shun me;**

my companions are in darkness.

Malcolm Guite, Anglican Priest, Poet and Author.

... the grief which we so often hide in embarrassment, the tears of which some people would want to make us ashamed, are the very things that make us most truly human. Grief and lament spring from the deepest parts of our soul because, however bitter the herbs and fruits they seem to bear, their real root is Love and I believe that it is Love who made the world and made us who we are.

Why should we need to make the case for giving place and even permission to our lamentation, our grief and our tears? Surely, such grief is the most natural thing in the world and should be met always, with compassion, and even a kind of admiration for the courage bereaved people show in expressing and even summoning the painful memories of those they have loved and lost. Yet we live in a culture that averts the eyes from death and is embarrassed at every reminder of mortality. We live in a culture of the ‘quick fix’, the easy answer, the so-called ‘power of positive thinking’.

Some thoughts: Anne Davis

I vividly remember one particular funeral visit I made. The deceased was a young woman of 34 who had had a history of drink and drug abuse but in the last couple of years of her life had made some very positive choices. Sadly, it was after she did so that her body reacted to the previous abuse and after being in a coma for 6 months her family had made the excruciating decision to turn off her life support machine. At first, I despaired of having anything other than a superficial conversation until her father said, “we want a celebration of her life, because that’s what you do these days”. I replied that was fine, but grief was allowed too. It was as though the floodgates had

opened and he shared with me at a profound and humbling level not only about his daughter but about his relationship with God. Without permission to lament the conversation would not have moved on to faith.

Biblical lament is not only about personal pain and grief but about lament for the world. Jesus is recorded as weeping twice in the Gospels, once at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:35) and once over the fate of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). Signs of public lament have become common in recent years – from the makeshift shrines at the site of road accidents – to the public outpourings of grief at horrors such as the Manchester Arena bombing or Grenfell Tower with faith groups conspicuously present, but what of our Sunday by Sunday, or indeed day to day, worship?

I wonder whether some at least of the much-bewailed loss of faith in our modern secular world is due to the fact that there has been little place for lament in our regular expressions of faith. The Psalms are full of an honesty that many might find shocking in a church service, how often are we given permission to tell God how it is?

Questions:

- When was the last time you heard lament as part of Worship?
- What words would you use to characterise Christian hymns?
- Is there a difference between lament and confessing our sins?
- How does Psalm 88 – the only Psalm which does not turn from lament to praise make you feel?
- Does lament imply a lack of trust in God?

SESSION THREE - ANGER

Psalm 83 NRSV

- ¹ O God, do not keep silence;
do not hold your peace or be still, O God!
- ² Even now your enemies are in tumult;
those who hate you have raised their heads.
- ³ They lay crafty plans against your people;
they consult together against those you protect.
- ⁴ They say, ‘Come, let us wipe them out as a nation;
let the name of Israel be remembered no more.’
- ⁵ They conspire with one accord;
against you they make a covenant—
- ⁶ the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites,
Moab and the Hagrites,
- ⁷ Gebal and Ammon and Amalek,
Philistia with the inhabitants of Tyre;
- ⁸ Assyria also has joined them;
they are the strong arm of the children of Lot.
- ⁹ Do to them as you did to Midian,
as to Sisera and Jabin at the Wadi Kishon,
- ¹⁰ who were destroyed at En-dor,
who became dung for the ground.
- ¹¹ Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb,
all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna,
- ¹² who said, ‘Let us take the pastures of God
for our own possession.’
- ¹³ **O my God, make them like whirling dust,
like chaff before the wind.**
- ¹⁴ As fire consumes the forest,
as the flame sets the mountains ablaze,
- ¹⁵ **so pursue them with your tempest
and terrify them with your hurricane.**
- ¹⁶ Fill their faces with shame, 9

- so that they may seek your name, O LORD.
- ¹⁷ **Let them be put to shame and dismayed for ever;
let them perish in disgrace.**
- ¹⁸ Let them know that you alone,
whose name is the LORD,
are the Most High over all the earth.

Psalm 137 NRSV

- ¹ By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
- ² **On the willows there
we hung up our harps.**
- ³ For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’
- ⁴ **How could we sing the LORD’s song
in a foreign land?**
- ⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
- ⁶ **Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.**
- ⁷ Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem’s fall,
**how they said, ‘Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!’**
- ⁸ O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
- ⁹ **Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!** 10

Richard Dawkins “The God Delusion”

“The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, blood-thirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sado-masochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”

So, Richard Dawkins, one of the so-called New Atheists, sums up in typically extreme language some of the most common objections to belief in the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, based on moral grounds.

Christians throughout the ages have been aware of this dilemma, how do we deal with the anger of God as portrayed in the Bible. Some have chosen to do so by ignoring the parts of the Biblical narrative they find unpalatable or by making a distinction between the God of the Old Testament and the God of Jesus. This is not necessarily a modern thing; the second century Marcion would have left us with Scriptures that contained little more than the Gospel of Luke. One of the problems with this approach is that anger is to be found in the New Testament as well as the Old, some of the most violent imagery of the entire bible being in the book of Revelation.

Other Christians have used fear of God’s wrath and hell-fire as a tool to frighten people into faith, one of the most notorious examples being the eighteenth century preacher, Jonathan Edwards’ sermon “Sinners in the hand of an angry God.” Or think of medieval wall paintings of the Last Judgement confronting worshippers whenever they entered Church.

Some thoughts – Anne Davis

It is not only the anger of God which is disturbing in the Bible, but human anger too. The authors of the Alternative Service Book of the Church of England published in 1980 went so far as to put sections of the Psalms in square brackets as being unsuitable for Christians to say. And they certainly can make uncomfortable reading. The beautiful song of lament which is Psalm 137 (echoing for me with the beat of Boney M) comes to a shocking conclusion with a prayer for violent and sickening revenge.

Would it better though if we failed to acknowledge our anger? To pretend that it does not exist, to claim that we could never feel like that, regardless of the circumstances. Repressed anger can lie at the root of many other problems.

Anger is not only destructive; anger at what is wrong in society has been one of the great motivating factors for change throughout the centuries, much of that led by Christians. As we look at our world today can it be right that we do not get angry as we see God’s children disregarded, sold and casually killed.

Some Questions

- How does the idea of an angry God make you feel?
- What makes you angry as a person?
- Is the opposite of anger love or indifference?
- How does anger relate to the call to “Hunger and thirst for righteousness”?
- Is it ever right to express anger in Church?

SESSION FOUR - PROPHECY

Psalm 23 NRSV

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, **I shall not want.**

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths

for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—

they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD

my whole life long.

Psalm 133 NRSV

¹ How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!

² **It is like the precious oil on the head,**

running down upon the beard,

on the beard of Aaron,

running down over the collar of his robes.

³ It is like the dew of Hermon,

which falls on the mountains of Zion.

For there the LORD ordained his blessing,

life for evermore.

Prophecy – a dictionary definition

Noun,

1. the foretelling or prediction of what is to come.
2. something that is declared by a prophet, especially a divinely inspired prediction, instruction, or exhortation.
3. a divinely inspired utterance or revelation: oracular prophecies.
4. the action, function, or faculty of a prophet.

“Prophetic power is a God-given ability to reveal the will of God in heaven by speaking so that things on earth are changed and conformed to the will of God.” **Steve Kline**

Some Thoughts – Anne Davis

Most Christians are likely to think first of prophecy as pointing forwards, an understanding which goes right back to the first Christians. Seeking to find ways of making sense of who Jesus was and what he had achieved, they returned to their Scriptures, what we know as the old Testament, and found there words which pointed forward to the life and death of Jesus. Isaiah 53, with its description of the suffering servant, Psalm 22 with its cry of dereliction, and many other examples, all seemed to describe what they had seen in Jesus. The pages of the New Testament are full of Old Testament quotations cited to show that “This was to fulfil what was spoken by the Prophets.” The arrangement of the Books in the Christian Old Testament with the Prophets at the end, rather than in the middle as with the Hebrew Bible, adds to this sense of something yet to be.

The reputation of biblical prophecy has not been helped by those who trawl scripture to find reference to events of our own day, or who make blood-thirsty pronouncements of the end of the world. 15

Foretelling the future is always going to be a risky business, as the history of the past few years shows. But if foretelling history from a human perspective is difficult enough, then how should we think to be able to state with confidence where God’s hand will be. Biblical prophets know that they are touching holy ground and use imagery and allusion rather than offering a precise timetable, and underlying it all the promise that God never has and never will abandon his creation.

But there is more than one meaning to Prophecy as the dictionary definition shows, and in biblical terms it is as much forthtelling as fore-telling, “Telling it like it is”. One of the most forthright of Old Testament Prophets, Amos, uses the image of the plumb line, God’s Word held up against the world of his day to show how far it has fallen from the true. The role of the prophet, then, is to tell truth to power as much, and I would want to argue more so, than it is to peer into the future. There is a warning though. Telling the truth to power has never been a popular or safe thing to do. It wasn’t in the days of Jeremiah, or John the Baptist, or Jesus. So why should we expect it to be in our own day?

Questions

- What comes to mind when you hear the word Prophecy?
- Would it be good to be able to see into the future?
- Which are the promises of God which mean the most to you?
- If God’s Word is a plumb line where do we go astray in our modern world?
- Who do you think of as a modern prophet?

SESSION FIVE - JUSTICE

Psalm 9

I will praise you, LORD, with all my heart; **I will tell of all the wonderful things you have done.**

2 I will sing with joy because of you. **I will sing praise to you, Almighty God.**

3 My enemies turn back when you appear; **they fall down and die.**

4 You are fair and honest in your judgements, **and you have judged in my favour.**

5 You have condemned the heathen **and destroyed the wicked;** they will be remembered no more. 6 **Our enemies are finished forever;** you have destroyed their cities, **and they are completely forgotten.**

7 But the LORD is king forever; he has set up his throne for judgement.

8 **He rules the world with righteousness; he judges the nations with justice.**

9 The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, **a place of safety in times of trouble.**

10 Those who know you, LORD, will trust you; **you do not abandon anyone who comes to you.**

11 Sing praise to the LORD, who rules in Zion! **Tell every nation what he has done!**

12 God remembers those who suffer; **he does not forget their cry, and he punishes those who wrong them.**

13 Be merciful to me, O LORD! See the sufferings my enemies cause me! **Rescue me from death, O LORD, 14 that I may stand before the people of Jerusalem and tell them all the things for which I praise you.**

I will rejoice because you saved me.

15 The heathen have dug a pit and fallen in; **they have been caught in their own trap.**

16 The LORD has revealed himself by his righteous judgements, **and the wicked are trapped by their own deeds.**

17 Death is the destiny of all the wicked, **of all those who reject God.**

18 The needy will not always be neglected; **the hope of the poor will not be crushed forever.**

19 Come, LORD! Do not let anyone defy you! Bring the heathen before you and pronounce judgement on them.

20 **Make them afraid, O LORD; make them know that they are only mortal beings.**

Psalm 75

We give thanks to you, O God, we give thanks to you! **We proclaim how great you are and tell of the wonderful things you have done.**

2 “I have set a time for judgement,” says God, “and I will judge with fairness.

3 **Though every living creature tremble and the earth itself be shaken, I will keep its foundations firm.**

4 I tell the wicked not to be arrogant;

5 **I tell them to stop their boasting.”**

6 Judgement does not come from the east or from the west, from the north or from the south;

7 **it is God who is the judge, condemning some and acquitting others.**

8 The LORD holds a cup in his hand, filled with the strong wine of his anger. **He pours it out, and all the wicked drink it; they drink it down to the last drop.**

9 But I will never stop speaking of the God of Jacob **or singing praises to him.**

10 He will break the power of the wicked, **but the power of the righteous will be increased.**

Introduction

The Bible tells us that God is just. This means that He is fair and impartial. It also means that He hates the ill-treatment and oppression of people and of nature, which He has created. He hates lying, cheating, and other forms of mistreatment of others. The fact that God is just means that.

All about God.com (a quotation):

“The Bible tells us that God is just. This means that He is fair and impartial. It also means that He hates the ill-treatment and oppression of people and of nature, which He has created. He hates lying, cheating, and other forms of mistreatment of others. The fact that God is just means that He can and will judge between right and wrong and He will administer justice in accordance with His standards.

Many times in the Bible God is pictured as a judge. The Bible says that He will one day judge the world. Many of us shy away from the thought of God as a judge because the examples of justice that we see on earth are flawed: some judges are corrupt and, even when their intentions are good, they can make mistakes. However, the fact that God is just assures us that when He acts as a judge, He will administer justice perfectly. His ability to do this involves other aspects/attributes of His character, including His ability to discern the truth in every situation and see into the hearts and minds of men, His wisdom, His strength, His authority, and His moral character in establishing what is right and wrong.

A God who did not care about the difference between right and wrong and did not judge humans for acting one way or the other would not be an admirable being worthy of our love or trust. The fact that God is just and will judge between right and wrong gives ultimate moral significance to our lives and makes us accountable for our actions.”

Some Thoughts: David Warrington

I have a strong belief in justice. I want the world to be fair and I believe fairness and equality of opportunity are values which lie at the heart of existence. Therefore, I believe that the God who is the source of all creation must be just, and be working for a fairer world through the Spirit. Yet I know the world is not fair nor is it always just. Even in the democratic world which most of us inhabit there is corruption, vested interests, cheating and criminal activity which all work against treating people equally. The Russian and Chinese experiments with building a ‘communist’ economy have substantially failed and rampant capitalism seems to be the only system left. It is a system that produces an increasing division between rich and poor yet there is nothing else on offer. There are times I wish I knew the answer, but I don’t. The Christian faith has always suggested that the Cross of Jesus holds some kind of answer to those of us who hold in the one hand a belief in a God of justice and in the other the experience of a world that lacks it to a large extent. Some Christians see the cross as Jesus paying the penalty for human sin (injustice included). I perhaps see it more as an expression of the pain in God’s heart when God embraces the world deeply and incarnationally, sharing with us in an unfolding process which at this point in time is far from perfect.

Questions:

- What are the current expressions of injustice that we see in the world today?
- How can we talk about the Cross reconciling divine justice and human sin?
- Why does God not ‘do something’ to alleviate human injustice?
- Can we celebrate Easter as the triumph of justice over injustice?
- What can we do to alleviate or undermine human injustice? 20