

PSALM 145

INTRODUCTION

For our Queen's 90th birthday, Mark Greene of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity gave a talk about her life of service and faith. He said,

'You can tell what is important to people by what they praise.'¹

We can tell what is important to people by what they praise. We live in a time when there is unprecedented access to people's opinions. The internet and social media allow all people to express what they think and feel, at any time, from any place, about any subject. We are invited to indicate our opinion regularly through 'likes' on websites and Youtube videos or by leaving comments and reviews. If you have a few spare minutes, glance over the things on the internet and find out who and what is praised – the pictures that are applauded, the statements that are considered praise-worthy. It is quite an eye-opener.

In contrast, Mark Greene's point was that the Queen praised the qualities of self-sacrificial service and commitment to others; and that she also pointed people to God as her inspiration and strength.

We are entering into a series on the book of Psalms, which is a collection of 150 songs, many of which were written by another monarch, a king whose heart was also committed to serving God and pointing people to God as his inspiration, strength and deliverance. We get the impression that when David's heart was overflowing, nothing could stop that from being expressed; whether he was hurting, afraid, overwhelmed, joyful, relieved, confused ... It's probably just as well he didn't have access to social media because he would constantly have been posting something!

We are looking at one of the later Psalms today: Psalm 145, which marks a turning point in this section of the Bible.

The previous few Psalms were written in a time of need: they include praise as a means of reminding the writer about God's ability and willingness to help and deliver in times of need, and they include petitions for God's intervention. In these Psalms, their hearts were overflowing with cries for help and deliverance; written out of lamentation, pain and desperate need. There is a sense of David calling out to God, saying, 'Don't forget me, Lord! Remember that only You can save me, only You can meet this need!'

¹ Mark Greene, *talk given at the Christians in Parliament reception to celebrate the Queen's 90th birthday, 8th June 2016. Talk on the website.*

Psalm 140 begins with David crying out, 'Deliver me, O LORD, from evil men...' (Verse 1) and continues, 'Keep me, O LORD, from the hands of the wicked; preserve me from violent men who have purposed to make my steps stumble.' (verse 4)

Psalm 142 was written at a low point when David was hiding out in a cave. He wrote, 'Attend to my cry, for I am brought very low; deliver me from my persecutors, for they are stronger than I.' (verse 6)

You get the idea: in these songs, David did not hold anything back from God, no matter what he was experiencing.

In contrast, Psalm 145 is pure praise – no requests or sense of need, just an outpouring of exultation at who God is and what He does for those who love Him. Psalms 146 to 150 all begin and end 'Praise the Lord!' There is a completely different tone to these Psalms: they are the overflow of hearts that are completely awestruck by how incredible God is.

PART ONE

Does that make it sound like praising is easy for some people? For those who are naturally positive and expressive? Perhaps, but this overflow of heart began when David set his mind to think about God. His song begins with a decision:

'I will extol You, my God, O King; and I will bless Your name forever and ever.'

To emphasise that decision, David reiterates it:

'Every day I will bless You, and I will praise Your name forever and ever.'

Praising 'forever and ever' begins with choosing to praise now, in the moment we are in, and that involves engaging our minds as well as our hearts and spirits in the act of worship.

How does David set his mind to praise God? We see in verse 5, when he said,

I will meditate on the glorious splendour of Your majesty, and on Your wondrous works. (v.5)

When we talk about meditating, we mean that we are focusing our thoughts onto something and considering it, mulling it over, dwelling on something mentally for a while. God created us to do this. Our minds automatically meditate on many things during the day: practical decisions, things we have heard on the news, family situations, work situations ... we consider them, mull them over, dwell on them mentally. It might be that we meditate on something that has happened to us, whether bad or good. What we dwell on mentally then impacts our emotional state.

Hopefully right now you are mulling over and considering what I am saying, but what else has your mind dwelt on this morning? How did that impact your mood?

In Philippians 4:8, Paul encouraged the church to focus their minds on 'whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, ... just, ... pure, ... lovely, ... of good report'. Paul was not telling them to stick their heads in the sand and ignore the terrible things of the world. He was not saying 'go to your happy place' until it is all over. Paul knew that focusing our minds on the things of God's kingdom is a constructive act, because this puts all other circumstances into perspective. And what could be more true, noble, just, pure, lovely and praise-worthy than our God? We are to meditate on His character and mighty acts in our hearts, to focus our minds on these things, as this helps settle us into His *shalom* – the peace that reminds us that no matter what we face, God is in charge and alongside us in every detail.

We have a choice about what we meditate on, but it may be that we need to ask the Holy Spirit to point out to us where we are dwelling on something harmful to us and to direct us onto considering the things of God's kingdom.

Unlike us, when David chose to meditate on the 'glorious splendour of [God's] majesty,' he was able to start from his own experience of kingship in the ancient world. He had the 'glorious splendour of [earthly] majesty' all around him, the abundance and magnificence of unimaginable wealth and the honour that was due to him as king. He could use that as a starting point and then remind himself that God's majesty would be far beyond that.

David had also experienced having absolute power as king, including holding the power of life and death over his people. David was great in power, authority, majesty and wealth. But how many of his people had David met? How many did he know by name? How many did he love? How many of his people loved and sincerely praised him? Was he praised because people feared they would die if they did not praise him?

God is the King of kings and Lord of lords – He called the universe into being and is perfect in every way. That is awesome and mind-blowing; but these are not things that cause us to praise or love someone. We might respect that, but it is unlikely we would ever love someone because of those things.

Over the Jubilee weekend, there was a theme in the statements of those who had met the Queen in person: they testified that the Queen wanted to talk to people and was genuinely interested in them, the work they did, the difficulties they faced. In this way, someone we know of by reputation becomes someone real and engaged with us personally. I was struck by the interviews with the cast of Eastenders after Prince Charles and Camilla had visited the set: people that they knew of had become people that they had personally interacted with, people who had been real, funny and interested in them. One actress was completely overwhelmed with the experience, and I think this is what we see with David in this Psalm.

When David wrote these words of praise, they were not written about someone he had heard of but never met. They were written about someone he knew and knew well. Praise flows from knowing God personally – from knowing it to be true that He upholds us, raises us up, provides for us, satisfies us, is close to us and hears our cry, who delivers and preserves us (verses 14-19).

Praise flows from knowing that our Almighty God and Eternal King is no totalitarian dictator but a King who knows each of His subjects by name; who knows every concern we have, every hurt we have experienced and who walks beside us in all situations. He wants to engage in the things that we are doing, He wants to know how things are with us, He wants to hear from us at any time of the day or night. We love and praise Him because He is never too busy to listen to us and help us. We praise and love Him because it matters to Him that we have all that we truly need: His presence and provision for our lives.

We use the adjective 'great' so casually now that it then becomes difficult to truly grasp what we mean when we talk about God being great. We describe our God as great because of His limitless power, authority and perfect justice. Our God is great because His power and authority can never be overthrown or defeated. Our God is great because His kingdom is eternal and glorious. Yes, these things are true and unchanging: He is great because He is beyond compare, no one can or will come close to being like Him.

But He is great and greatly to be praised because He will never be corrupted by the power He holds. He is greatly to be praised because God used His awesome power to become human and live alongside us; He used His awesome power to die in our place at Calvary; He used His awesome power to defeat sin and death so we could be in relationship with Him, in fullness of life, now and forever more.

This is a King who knocks at the door of our hearts and waits patiently for admittance. He does not knock the door down and take over: it is our choice. We can say 'no' to Him and He will accept that.

This is why David proclaimed in verse 3:

'Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; and His greatness is unsearchable.'

This is why we love Him; this is why our hearts overflow with worship to Him.

In these days where we have little time for our leaders, we can rejoice that Almighty God reigns eternally and perfectly in righteousness, majesty and mercy.

PART TWO

We have looked at the choice to praise and how it begins with deliberately focusing our minds on the things of God. As we do this, we impact our emotions and stir our hearts and spirits into praise.

But we are not just to meditate on these things; we are also to speak out, sing out and shout out about them. So, what happens when we speak out praise of God?

Heartfelt praise of God changes what is happening in the spiritual places around us.

Firstly, when we praise God we give Him the glory for things He has done. In other words, we are not claiming the glory for ourselves. It is always a spiritually powerful act when we publicly acknowledge that we have not been able to do something by ourselves - that it was God's strength and enabling that brought about a good outcome. This is because it goes against the ways of the world, but it is directly in line with the Kingdom of God.

Secondly, we join with God's kingdom in fixing our eyes on Him and worshipping the only one who is worthy. Again, this goes completely against the way of the world, which does not want to recognise God let alone praise Him and give Him glory. However, all those in God's presence are filled and continuously overflowing with praise for Him – it is not forced because their vision is filled with His goodness and glory! That is where we will be one day, and for the first time we will know what it is to be able to praise God without any effort at all.

Thirdly, Psalm 22:3 says that God is enthroned in our praises, so we are establishing God's kingship and authority on Earth as in Heaven.

Fourthly, praise builds faith in us and those around us. We need to remember what God has done in the past so we can build trust that He will bring us through the present difficulty.

This is the key point of David's message in Psalm 145:

Verse 4 says, One generation shall praise Your works to another, and shall declare Your mighty acts. (v.4)

Verses 6-7 say, Men shall speak of the might of Your awesome acts... they shall utter the memory of Your great goodness and shall sing of Your righteousness. (v.6-7)

In verses 10 to 12:

‘Your saints shall bless You. They shall speak of the glory of Your kingdom, and talk of Your power, *to make known* to the sons of men His mighty acts...’

Our praise of God is our testimony to each other, and that testimony is powerful.

It is crucial that we spend time alone with God. It is in those quiet moments that we draw close to Him and receive the waters of His presence that refresh and strengthen us. But we are also to speak out praise, as our hearts overflow with love and thankfulness for Him.

This is not something that comes naturally to many of us. But in Ancient Israel, this does not seem to be a problem that afflicted anyone. Because of that, we have a rich source of praise to God in the Bible that testifies to God's goodness across the generations.

One of the Old Testament characters who really stands out for me is the Judge, Deborah. She was a woman who knew the importance of being in close, personal relationship with God;

she listened to His instructions and was obedient to them. She was a woman of faith and ability; she was not afraid to literally go out into battle with Israel. It would have been so easy for her to use that opportunity to speak about her own brilliance, her own ability and take all the glory for herself. But she didn't. There was no false humility, either – she knew that she had done well, but she also knew that the victory was God's alone.

After Israel had won the battle, Deborah sang out words of praise to glorify God; but her words were also her triumphant witness statement. Her song began with a call to others to pay attention:

“Hear, O kings! Give ear, O princes! I, even I, will sing to the Lord; I will sing praise to the Lord God of Israel.” Judges 5:2-3

Deborah had no intention of letting God's deliverance be forgotten by anyone in Israel. She had resolved to praise and meditate on these things herself. She had resolved to testify to God's act of deliverance, so that others would remember and meditate on her words and be encouraged and strengthened in faith. All those who heard were, in their turn, to “...recount the righteous acts of the Lord...” as they went about their business: at the well, as they walked along the roads, as they sat at the city gates. Judges 5:11 They were to teach their children and grandchildren of what God had done. We are also to teach on it and pass it on.

Deborah's song is just one of many. There is also Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2, where she testified to God's work in her life:

“*My heart* rejoices in the Lord ... I smile at my enemies, because I rejoice in Your salvation. ² No one is holy like the Lord, For there is none besides You, Nor is there any rock like our God.”

There is the testimony of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15 – twenty verses that glorify God for His miraculous deliverance of Israel.

“I will sing to the Lord, For He has triumphed gloriously! The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea! ² The Lord is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation; He is my God, and I will praise Him; My father's God, and I will exalt Him.”
Ex.15:1-2

These are words of exultation, pouring out of people who are delighting in how wonderful and glorious God is, revelling in His miraculous work of transforming desperate, hopeless situations into songs of deliverance and victory.

I am aware that not all of us will have hearts overflowing with praise this morning. We might have that spirit of heaviness dragging us down. I encourage you to look at some of these songs of witness, where people testify as to how God turned their desperate circumstances around. Read Deborah's story in Judges 4 and 5, or Hannah's story in 1 Samuel 1 and 2. Or turn to the New Testament songs of Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah ... These are people who

knew God, who had experienced His goodness and greatness in difficult and painful circumstances, whose testimony has been passed down through countless generations to us. This is to encourage us to trust in this God of ours: to know that He will provide for us, strengthen us and bring us through to eternal victory in His kingdom.

Conclusion

You can tell what is important to someone by what they praise.

David had grown up as the youngest of a large family; he had been a shepherd, a courtier, a soldier, an outcast, a king. He had lived in many situations, some comfortable and luxurious, sometimes a cave with his life in danger. In all that he had experienced, good and bad, his testimony to us is that God is great and greatly to be praised.

Deborah served God in leadership, through times of national danger and on the battlefield. Her testimony to us is that God is great and greatly to be praised.

Hannah experienced years of mockery and bullying in her home, but turned to God for help and became the mother of one of the greatest prophets in the Old Testament. Her testimony to us is that God is great and greatly to be praised.

Moses was estranged from his birth family and from his adoptive family. He was a murderer and a fugitive from justice. He became a shepherd in the wilderness and was then chosen to deliver Israel from slavery. Against all the odds, Moses saw God deliver His people. His testimony to us is the God is great and greatly to be praised.

What is our testimony to others? Where can we say, this is where I saw God deliver me; this is what I have seen Him do in my life? We are grafted into a faith which is expressive in its praise to God – maybe we need to develop that family likeness a bit more.

Except, that involves us trying hard and that does not seem to work... We need the Holy Spirit to work in us and help us. We need divine help in exchanging the spirit of heaviness for the garment of praise.

About ten years ago, Lyndall Bywater preached here on Caleb. When his daughter married, he gave her land. His daughter then requested the streams and the overflow as part of her inheritance. This message came back to me as I prepared this talk. This church has been given land in Canterbury by God. But perhaps we now need to ask God for the streams and the overflow of the waters of the Holy Spirit, both for our own benefit and for the benefit of others as we pour out our testimonies of God's greatness.

Let us have a time of quietness to invite the Holy Spirit to speak to us; to ask for the Holy Spirit to bring the streams and overflow of His presence into each one of us.

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised...

Lord, we proclaim together today, that You are great and greatly to be praised.

We confess that we can find it difficult to praise You – we get distracted, caught up in the terrible things of the world, we get embarrassed or worried about how other people will respond.

We choose now to fill our minds with knowledge of Your majesty, goodness and love for us.

We ask You, Holy Spirit, to do the things that we cannot do for ourselves. Come and fill us like a mountain stream that refreshes us, invigorates and energises us. Exchange any spirit of heaviness and exhaustion affecting us for a garment of praise. Where we find it difficult to praise You and testify to Your character and acts, we ask You to remove those blockages and to release us to overflow with praise for You. May we be a people who testify to Your goodness.

We thank You, Lord, for the land You have given us here at St. Andrew's; and we ask now for the streams and the overflow so that many in Canterbury will come to know that You alone are God and You alone are good.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen.

As the worship group gather, let us stand and proclaim together, regardless of our circumstances:

We will extol You, our God, our King; and we will bless Your name forever and ever.

Every day we will bless You, and we will praise Your name forever and ever.

Our mouths shall speak the praise of the LORD, and all flesh shall bless His holy name, forever and ever. Amen.

(Psalm 145: 1-3 and 21)