

Tradition designated Psalms 113-118, known as the Hallel (Hymns of Praise) as psalms to be sung at the Passover in celebration of the Lord's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt.¹ Psalm 113 and 114 were sung before the meal and Psalms 115-118 after. It is safe to assume that Jesus sang Psalm 113 with the disciples before he celebrated his last Passover when he instituted the Lord's Supper. To pray Psalm 113 before reading John 13 puts Jesus' foot-washing in perspective. Psalm 113 is a call for the people of God to praise Yahweh because of his incomprehensible greatness and his unfathomable grace. This short nine verse psalm is critically important in presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ. Psalm 113 celebrates the Lord whose glory is above the heavens, but who humbly stoops down to raise the poor from the dust, lift the needy from the dump, and make the barren woman "a happy mother of children." The Lord transcends his transcendence. In humility he rescues the poor and redeems the lost.

Jesus became the embodiment of Psalm 113 when he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing and wrapped a towel around his waist and began washing the disciples feet. By deliberately dressing down, he dramatically portrayed his descent into humble service and sacrifice. The "One who sits enthroned on high" stooped down and on bended knee humbly illustrated "the full extent of his love" (John 13:1). The God who kneels is an apt description of God's saving grace. There is a far greater danger of reading too little into this picture than reading too much. Missionary Leslie Newbigin writes, "The foot-washing is a sign of that ultimate subversion of all human power and authority which took place when Jesus was crucified by the decision of the 'powers' that rule this present age."² The association of Psalm 113 with John 13 puts both biblical texts in perspective.

Praise the Name

Praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord, you his servants;

praise the name of the Lord.

Let the name of the Lord be praised,

both now and forevermore.

From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets,

the name of the Lord is to be praised.

Psalm 113:1-3

The call to praise is repeated in five quick bursts. The invitation is compelling and comprehensive. The Name stands for the totality of the Lord's character and actions. "You his servants" is inclusive of all God's people, even those "other sheep" who will hear the Lord's voice (for "there shall be one flock and one shepherd" - John 10:16). The title "servant" gives special status to every single believer. It stands for the privilege and responsibility of "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession," for the purpose of declaring the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Pet 2:9). "Both now

¹ Ross, Psalms, 386. Okorocho, Africa Bible Commentary, 717.

² Leslie Newbigin, John, 168.

and forevermore,” means today, tomorrow, and always. Or, as the apostle Paul said, “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess 5:16-18). “From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets,” means “from east to west, from dawn to dusk, keep lifting all your praises to God” (Ps 113:3, The Message). This continual praise and worship of the Lord as Creator and Redeemer is the leading edge of everything the Church does throughout the world from evangelism to ministries of compassion and justice.

The imperative of praise is as contagious as it is compelling. Believers cannot be hounded or browbeaten into “enthusiastic and spontaneous praise.”³ No one can “make” someone praise the Lord, but we can lead others by our conviction and our practice. Those who “rejoice in the Lord always” and who deal with their worries and anxiety “by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving,” will encourage others to enter into worship. The evidence of the “peace of God” – the peace that transcends all understanding and guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus – is the greatest invitation to others to enter into continuous praise (Phil 4:4-7).⁴ Augustine saw in this invitation to praise a call to humility and wisdom – the humility of the trusting child and the wisdom of the mature believer: “Let your old age be childlike, and your childhood like old age; that is, that neither may your wisdom be with pride, nor your humility without wisdom, that you may ‘praise the Lord from this for evermore.’”⁵

Glory and Grace

*The Lord is exalted over all the nations,
his glory above the heavens.
Who is like the Lord our God,
the One who sits enthroned on high,
who stoops down to look
on the heavens and the earth?
He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes,
with the princes of the people.
He settles the childless woman in her home
as a happy mother of children.
Praise the Lord.*

Psalm 113:4-9

The stanza begins with the Lord of glory exalted above the nations and ends with a once barren woman now a happy mother of children. The fact that these two images merge in a single picture

³ Ross, Psalms, 390.

⁴ Calvin, Psalms, 331. Somewhat characteristically Calvin takes the psalmist’s call to praise as an occasion to rebuke human apathy. “And if we consider how cold and callous men are in this religious exercise, we will not deem the repetition of the call to praise God superfluous. We all acknowledge that we are created to praise God’s name, while, at the same time, his glory is disregarded by us. Such criminal apathy is justly condemned by the prophet [psalmist], with the view of stirring up to unwearied zeal in praising God.” Calvin is right in his assessment of the human condition, but the psalmist does not condemn “criminal apathy” or say anything negative in his invitation to continuous praise.

⁵ Augustine, Psalms, 548.

of reality is the reason why everyone, everywhere, everyday should praise the Lord. Those who pray the Psalms are familiar with the description of transcendence. The Lord is over the nations, above the heavens, beyond comparison, and sits enthroned on high as King of kings and Lord of lords. But the greatness and glory of the Lord is matched by the Lord's humility and grace. The Majestic One "stoops down to look on the heavens and earth." Literally, he makes himself low. He comes down to see. He condescends to care. He transcends his transcendence. "He is anything but aloof" and his actions "anticipate the great downward and upward sweep of the gospel."⁶ No one is like the Lord.

Psalm 113 celebrates the essence of salvation history. We are never far from an example of the Lord stooping down to rescue the poor, the needy, and the barren, whether it be Joseph or Job or the whole people of Israel (Deut 7:7) or Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Hannah. The psalm looks back to Hannah's song and quotes from it directly, "He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor" (1 Sam 2:8). Psalm 113 is the DNA of the gospel. Patrick Reardon reads the psalm as a "prayerful compendium" of the Gospel of Luke, with Mary's Magnificat capturing the polarity of "high and low" reflected in the psalm and the motif that runs through the Gospel.⁷

How can we but praise the Lord when his stooping down means raising us up? Are we not the poor, the needy, and the barren? Martin Luther emphasized that the Lord only lifts up those who know they are "pressed down." He does not lift up those who are self-centered and self-sufficient. "But although we are in truth all cast down and depressed, yet He does not lift and raise up all, but only those who acknowledge themselves to be downcast and depressed."⁸ Grace leads us to confess that we are downcast sinners in need of salvation. "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). Grace awakens our need for God and with Paul we acknowledge that "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one can boast before him" (1 Cor 1:27-29).

Envisioned in the psalmist's examples of grace is the descent of the Incarnate One, full of grace and truth (John 1:14), who "made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. . . . He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!" (Phil 2:7). "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," writes Paul, "that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). In the upper room, John tells us that "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer garment, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him" (John 13:3-5). We have in this scene a vivid picture of Psalm 113, of the Lord of glory stooping down to raise us up.

⁶ Kidner, Psalms, 402.

⁷ Reardon, Christ in the Psalms, 223.

⁸ Luther, Psalms, Luther's Works, vol 11, 392.