

The concluding set of five psalms (Ps 146-150) begins and ends with “Praise the Lord” or “Hallelujah.” This is the third set of Hallel Psalms which includes the Egyptian Hallel (Ps 113-118) and the Great Hallel (Ps 120-136). Psalm 146 serves as bridge between Psalm 145, the final David psalm, and the final set of praise psalms. Psalm 146 covers similar themes as in Psalm 145, including a personal commitment to unceasing praise, complete confidence in the sufficiency of the Lord – our only help and hope for time and eternity, and the Lord’s compassion toward the oppressed and hungry.

For New Testament believers this concluding set of psalms challenges the life we live between the Hallelujahs. Do we share the psalmist’s life-long passion for *public* praise? Is our *holistic* trust in God *alone* or are we trying to manage divided loyalties? Does the Lord’s commitment to the oppressed, the hungry, the prisoner, the blind, the bowed down, the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow reflect the mission of the gospel in our lives? Life in the middle, between the Hallelujahs, focuses our attention on the God of Jacob, who continues to transform self-centered strivers into “salt and light” disciples.

Call to Exclusive Praise

*Praise the Lord. [Hallelujah!]
Praise the Lord, my soul.
I will praise the Lord all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
Do not put your trust in princes,
in human beings, who cannot save.
When their spirit departs, they return to the ground;
on the very day their plans come to nothing.
Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is the Lord their God.*

Psalm 146:1-5

The psalmist’s self-exhortation to praise models for the believer the determination of the heart and will that transcends mood and feelings. The fragility inherent in a modern life of divided loyalties with multiple masters and competing agendas makes the singularity of the psalmist’s devotion exemplary. There is a clarity inherent in his conviction that leads to peace and tranquility. He faces the day and holds depression at bay with the power of devotion. This power does not come from his will or from any form of sentiment, but from the grace and wisdom of the Lord who invites and participates in this praise. In the morning, when he arises, he meets with the Lord. The psalmist begins the day not alone, but in the company of his Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.

Having exhorted himself to life long praise, he bluntly warns all believers, in his day and our own, “Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save” (Ps 146:3). The

connection between these two exhortations is the fierce competition for our devotion. The Great Deceiver endeavors to dissuade the people of God from trusting in the Lord and to shift their loyalties to “princes.” As the next line indicates, the designation “princes” covers the whole range of competing objects of devotion from powerful influential people to mere mortals. Given our sinful predisposition to idolatry and foolishness any human being can become a messiah figure. Celebrities, in all fields and disciplines, are an obvious attraction, but parents, friends, coaches, and teachers qualify as well. We are sinfully inclined to put our hope in politicians, lovers, and experts. The pantheon of counterfeit gods is too numerous to count.

The stated reason for not trusting in princes is that no matter how powerful and influential they may be, they are mere mortals and when they die, “their projects die with them” (Ps 146:4 The Message). All success is short-lived and soon forgotten, but the Lord reigns forever and the people of God go on for all generations (Ps 146:10).

A sure sign of placing one’s trust in “princes” is when American Christians talk as if they had no other identity or loyalty than to their nation and party. “This may be a reason why so many people now respond to U. S. political trends in such an extreme way,” writes Tim Keller. “They become agitated and fearful for the future. They have put the kind of hope in their political leaders and policies that once was reserved for God and the work of the gospel.”¹ If we are living between the Hallelujahs we will keep in mind that the Christian before the world is like Jesus before Pilate. Believers need to hear these words over and over again to stay on mission: “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36).

Cardinal Thomas Wolsey was the leading Churchman in England and chaplain to King Henry VIII (1473-1530). An ambitious and calculated man, Wolsey compromised his integrity and his office to gain political power. When he failed to obtain an annulment of Henry’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon, he fell from the King’s favor. He was stripped of his titles and later indicted for treason. In Shakespeare’s play Wolsey laments his demise and his vain trust in princes. The Bard of Avon offers a warning that hold true today:

Farewell, a long farewell to all my greatness! . . .
Like little wanton boys that swim on bladders [inter-tubes]
This many summers in a sea of glory;
But far beyond my depth: my high-blown pride
At length broke under me; and now has left me,
Weary and old with service, to the mercy
Of a rude stream, that must forever hide me.
Vain pomp and glory of this world, I hate ye:
I feel my heart now open’d. O, how wretched
Is that poor man that hangs on princes’ favors!
There is, betwixt that smile we would aspire to,
That sweet aspect of princes, and their ruin,

¹ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 99.

More pangs and fears than wars or woman have;
And when he falls, he falls like Lucifer,
Never to hope again.²

Jesus warned, “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and the love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other” (Matthew 6:24). Jesus exposed a conflict of interest that remains pervasive among believers. We are steeped in expressive individualism and personal autonomy. We fancy ourselves as masters of the universe priding ourselves on self-rule. We are little chiefs with multiple tribal loyalties: family, school, work, sports, hobbies, church, friends, and entertainment. Our multiple tribal identities, each with its own set of cultural customs, rituals, offerings, and obligations, compete for our time, energy, and loyalty. Colleagues at work, next-door neighbors, work-out friends, and even family members may not even know we belong to Christ. Jesus calls for total allegiance, single-minded devotion.

The first section ends with a blessing, the last beatitude of the Psalter.³ The psalmist sets up a contrast between those who trust in human beings, including themselves, and those whose help comes from the God of Jacob. The surprising truth about Yahweh is the divine humility that refuses to give up on his covenant promise, even though all he has to work with are fast-talking, shifty-eyed, self-serving people like Jacob.

Jacob was “born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7). From birth, Jacob’s experience of life involved struggle and striving. His life became one long series of conflicts. He failed to measure up to his father’s expectations and he was molded by his mother’s aspirations. Doted on by his mother and distanced from his father, he felt both abandoned and possessed. He was a pawn in their marital conflict and an antagonist to his brother whom he conned out of his birthright and cheated out of his blessing. True to his name, he was always grasping for more and striving to achieve the upper hand for himself. Yet in the midst of all that striving God made himself known in an unforgettable way (Gen 28:10-22).

All the beatitudes in the Psalms, including this one, point forward to Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus began with eight fundamental emotional attitudes, eight convictions of the soul, eight character qualities of the inner person. The Master paints a portrait of his followers from the inside out. He begins with their hearts and offers a glimpse of their character. The beatitudes reveal the heart and soul of what it means to follow Jesus. They describe a *state* of grace rather than a *means* of grace. These are not *prerequisites* for grace but the *evidences* of grace. Charles Spurgeon warned, “Do not fall into the mistake of supposing that the opening verses of the Sermon on the Mount set forth how we are to be saved, or you may cause your soul to stumble. You will find the fullest light upon the matter of how to be saved in other parts of our Lord’s teaching, but here He talks about the question, ‘Who are the saved?’ or, ‘What are the marks and evidences of a work of grace in the soul?’”⁴

² Shakespeare, King Henry The Eighth, III. II. 350-372, in William Shakespeare: The Complete Works. New York: Dorset Press, 1988: 1182.

³ Kidner, Psalms, vol. 1, 47. “Blessing” is used twenty-six times in the Psalter: Psalm 1:1; 2:12; 32:1,2; 33:12; 34:8; 40:4; 41:1; 65:4; 84:4,5,12; 89:15; 94:12; 106:3; 112:1; 119:1,2; 127:5; 128:1,2; 137:8,9; 144:15,16; 146:5.

⁴ Spurgeon, God Will Bless, 8.

The Messianic Mission

*He is the Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them –
he remains faithful forever.
He upholds the cause of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.
The Lord sets prisoners free,
the Lord gives sight to the blind,
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down,
the Lord loves the righteous.
The Lord watches over the foreigner
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.
The Lord reigns forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the Lord.*

Psalm 146:6-10

Unlike all other worldly categories of greatness, the “Maker of heaven and earth” is known for his faithfulness to the oppressed and fatherless. The list of recipients of the Lord’s love and mercy is once again expressed in a nine to one ratio (see Psalm 145). The psalmist makes a point of repeating the Lord’s name, Yahweh, seven times in this section. The Lord’s presence, power, and mercy dominates this description. When it comes to the oppressed, the hungry, the imprisoned, the blind, the fallen, the righteous, the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow, the Lord says in effect, “I’ve got this.” The Lord fights for justice, feeds the hungry, sets prisoners free, gives sight to the blind, lifts up the bowed down, loves the righteous, watches over the foreigner, and sustains the orphan and the widow. This is what it means to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33). This is the “one new humanity” forged by the social reality of the gospel (Eph 2:15). This is what James meant when he said, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27).

Charles Spurgeon’s commentary on verse nine is especially timely as the United States and Europe wrestle with “the refugee crisis.”

“Many monarchs hunted aliens down, or transported them from place to place, or left them as outlaws unworthy of the rights of man; but Jehovah made special laws for their shelter within his domain. In this country the stranger was, a little while ago, looked upon as a vagabond,—a kind of wild beast to be avoided if not to be assaulted; and even to this day there are prejudices against foreigners which are contrary to our holy religion. Our God and King is never strange to any of his creatures, and if any are left in a solitary and forlorn condition he has a special eye to their preservation. He relieveth the fatherless and widow. These excite his

compassion, and he shows it in a practical way by upraising them from their forlorn condition. The Mosaic law made provision for these destitute persons. When the secondary fatherhood is gone the child falls back upon the primary fatherhood of the Creator; when the husband of earth is removed the godly widow casts herself upon the care of her Maker. But the way of the wicked he turneth upside down. He fills it with crooked places; he reverses it, sets it down, or upsets it. That which the man aimed at he misses, and he secures that for himself which he would gladly have avoided. The wicked man's way is in itself a turning of things upside down morally, and the Lord makes it so to him providentially: everything goes wrong with him who goes wrong.”⁵

The seven-fold repetition of Yahweh’s action is the psalmist’s way of emphasizing that all of the Lord’s social justice is rooted in his covenant love, his steadfast love, which is to say today, the good news of Jesus Christ. We cannot have social justice apart from the gospel of grace. The atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and his bodily resurrection is the true and only ground for overturning the evils of oppression and the greed that causes scarcity and the selfishness that breaks up families. Those who believe that justice can be achieved apart from justification by faith do not understand the Lord’s covenant love and necessity of the Cross.

Christ’s followers cannot pray Psalm 146 without thinking of Jesus’ inaugural sermon in Nazareth when he unrolled the scroll of Isaiah and read from Isaiah 61:1-2 (Luke 4:14-21). Jesus began his public ministry by proclaiming good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoner, and recovery of sight for the blind. Reardon calls these “the great messianic signs.”⁶ “All of the Lord’s various restorations and acts of therapy were both the foreshadowing and the firstfruits of that definitive curing of the human race accomplished on the Cross.”⁷

⁵ Spurgeon, Treasury of David, Psalm 146.

⁶ Reardon, Christ in the Psalms, 291.

⁷ Reardon, Christ in the Palms, 292.