

Praise God with Music

Psalms 149, 150

October 31, 2021

Psalms 146 to 150, the last five in the book of *Psalms*, are known as the “Halleluiah” psalms. They begin and end with, “Praise the LORD!” In Hebrew, that is transliterated as “Halleluiah!,” or “Praise Yah!,” where “Yah” is a shorter form of the divine name transliterated into English as YHWH or “Yaweh.” So these five psalms, in a sense, are a five-fold benediction or “Amen” to the Psalter. Briefly, here is what each is about:

Psalm 146: In contrast to the others, this is an individual’s psalm praising God. It calls particular attention to God’s care for the oppressed, the hungry, those bowed down, for the orphan and the widow. “Put not your trust in princes, but in the LORD.”

Psalm 147: Praise to God for his care for Jerusalem, and the Jewish people. This is particularly true of the second half of the psalm, 12-20, which in the Greek Hebrew Bible translation, the Septuagint, are separated into a separate psalm.

Psalm 148: Praise God for his majesty and goodness as revealed in nature. The sequence of those to praise the LORD follows that of Genesis 1, the Creation story.

Psalm 149: Praise God for his faithfulness to Israel, and His recent deliverance of Israel (the Jewish people) from foreign oppressors, likely the Greeks.

Psalm 150: A summary of praise of the LORD, that answers four questions: Where is God to be praised? Why is He to be praised? How is the LORD to be praised? And, finally, who is to praise him? The answer to the last question is universal. “All that breathes” is to praise the LORD! Halleluiah!

Our lesson really is about all five of these psalms, but the lesson book only has so much space, and I’m trying to keep this document to but five pages. So, like the lesson book, I’ll focus on Psalms 149 and 150. But before that, I’ll mention a few things that unite these psalms besides the beginning and ending “Halleluiah!” One is the concern for the oppressed and needy. This is most explicit in Psalm 146, there the Psalmist himself must had had experiences that led him to say, “Do not put your trust in princes.” (verse 3).

In the context of those days, “princes” represent government. There was no alternative at the time. Monarchy in one form or another was the universal answer to the question of how large numbers of people could coexist (relatively) peacefully. Someone, a king or an emperor, had to be in charge. Yes, there were experiments with tribal government (as in the period of the Judges for Israel, and among nomads). There was small scale city-state democracy in Greece (ended by Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great). But the dominant powers always ended up as monarchies and empires. The psalmist is declaring, “Put no faith in their ability to govern justly!” Yes, sometimes there would be good kings among the leaders of Judah, or even of the Roman emperors. But the record isn’t good. Most were incompetent, corrupt, bad, or even outright evil.

The second theme throughout is the magnificence of God’s Creation and ongoing demonstrations of power compared to the limits of human power and ability. That is especially the focus of Psalm 148. Consider verse 5 (concerning the Sun, Moon and stars and the heavens): “Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created.” Pagans attributed to the stars and heavenly bodies power and influence as gods. The Psalmist’s answer, and that of the Jewish faith (and ours) is that these are all merely works of the LORD’s Creation, not independent powers. There is but one God, a magnificent, almighty and yet loving God, who is just, and has shown that justice and righteousness to Israel. A third theme is the celebration in praising God with music, seen in all of these Psalms. I’ll revisit this when discussing Psalm 150.

Psalm 149

¹Praise the Lord.^[a]

Sing to the Lord a new song,

his praise in the assembly of his faithful people.

²Let Israel rejoice in their Maker;

let the people of Zion be glad in their King.

³Let them praise his name with dancing

and make music to him with timbrel and harp.

⁴For the Lord takes delight in his people;

he crowns the humble with victory.

⁵Let his faithful people rejoice in this honor

and sing for joy on their beds.

**⁶May the praise of God be in their mouths
and a double-edged sword in their hands,
⁷to inflict vengeance on the nations
and punishment on the peoples,
⁸to bind their kings with fetters,
their nobles with shackles of iron,
⁹to carry out the sentence written against them—
this is the glory of all his faithful people.
Praise the Lord.**

Psalm 150

**¹Praise the Lord.^[b]
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty heavens.
²Praise him for his acts of power;
praise him for his surpassing greatness.
³Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,
praise him with the harp and lyre,
⁴praise him with timbrel and dancing,
praise him with the strings and pipe,
⁵praise him with the clash of cymbals,
praise him with resounding cymbals.
⁶Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.
Praise the Lord.**

a. [Psalm 149:1](#) Hebrew *Hallelu Yah*; also in verse 9

b. [Psalm 150:1](#) Hebrew *Hallelu Yah*; also in verse 6

Both of these psalms seem to be post-exilic. In verse 1, the psalmist cries, **“Sing to the LORD a new song, ...”** This would seemingly be a celebration of some new act of God, much as the way Miriam’s Song (Exodus 15: 20-21) celebrated the miracle at the Red Sea during the Exodus, God’s hand in the Israelites’ salvation, just after that event. Here the miracle is not explicit, but very likely is the overthrow of Greek control of Palestine during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes IV by the Maccabean revolt in 168-164 B.C. The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah celebrated the rededication of the temple after it was cleansed of the idols and practices installed by the Greeks. Verses 6-9, praise God for vindicating them, and for allowing them to be God’s agent for justice against the oppressors.

I think it's worth looking at these verses, which the lesson writer omits, because it may connect with the Jewish vision of what a "Messiah" would be in Jesus's time. In the context of the Maccabean revolt, the Jews were "the humble" of verse 4, who were given victory. They were not set up as rulers of the world, but were now free to govern themselves and worship God freely. That seems to be the context for this psalm. But what happened later was division, intrigue, and corruption. So much so, that the Romans were sent for to settle things. They installed Herod. That takes us up to the time when Jesus was born, with the Jews no longer free, but now under Roman domination. So, this triumph was not the first step toward establishing the LORD's kingdom on earth, with the Jews as the dominant rulers. Well, there were still expectations that the Messiah would come along and fix that! These verses convey a bit of that expectation.

Psalm 150, as mentioned, asks the questions, "Where?" "Why?" "How?" and "Who?" The LORD is to be praised "... **in his sanctuary.**" That would be the Temple, on earth. But also "in his mighty firmament (RSV)," that is, in heaven (NRSV). (Psalm 148 also included, "all deeps," the lowest ends of the Creation as well.) Verse 2 answers, "Why?" "**Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him for his surpassing greatness.**" This isn't worship of a god who wound up the Creation like a clock, and then just sat back to watch it run. God participates, and does wondrous things. He is great; nothing is greater. There is no higher power than the LORD, in contrast to some of the Gnostic ideas that were even then floating around in the Greek world.

The psalmist builds to a crescendo in verses 3-5. Trumpets were instruments used by the priests. They called people to worship, especially at festivals, and also in time of war. In the second half of verse 3, the lute and harp join in. These were instruments of the Levites, who were distinct from the priests by this time. So, the volume builds. Then the worshipers join in with instruments of the common people, the tambourine, and with dancing, then with "strings" and "the pipe." Those last two were not commonly mentioned in connection with worship. Here "strings" seems distinct from the lute mentioned earlier. There were various different stringed instruments, with 10 and 12 strings mentioned, and some pictured with as few as three or six strings on coins. As the people join in, the volume builds. People break into dancing in celebration. Finally, in verse 5 the cymbal (a Levite instrument) joins the chorus! And, all that breathe praise the LORD! Think of the way Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture builds in volume to the finale, in which

even cannons join in! Without cannons, those loud clashing cymbals were the best that could be done! A fitting finale to the Psalms!

We live more than two thousand years after these psalms were written. We are aware of a Universe much grander and immense than the ancients could comprehend. Maybe we, too, cannot really grasp the meaning of such a Creation. Those tiny stars, like diamonds in the sky, turn out to each be of power and glory like the Sun. They are innumerable. Yet, there was a beginning, too. All this was created, just as the Bible says it was. The time scale may not match what scientists believe now, any better than the sense of distance, which is so much vaster now than could be imagined back then.

And yet, for the immensity of Creation, and our seeming insignificance compared to the size of the Universe, God cares for each one of us in a way that is unexplainable. For those who can see and hear, the evidence is there in God's mighty works, but also in his love and caring. The psalmists find evidence of God's love and caring in His faithfulness to his people, the Jews and the Israelites. But also even to individuals, to those who call to the LORD for help, as in Psalm 146. Later Jesus would come. In His life and death He would live out God's love and caring for each of us, yet another signpost of what the psalmists are proclaiming in these psalms. Furthermore, in Jesus's resurrection and through presence of the Holy Spirit, we have evidence and assurance of God's plan and caring for us.

Prayer: O God, your compassion amazes us. We are thankful to be in the company of those who praise you. Work in our hearts today that our praise for you would be authentic and joyful. Amen.

Next week we move to the New Testament. Our next three lessons are from the Revelation of John.