

A Primer on Praise

Psalms for Uncertain Times

Psalm 100:1-5

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Most every night it is my job to put our two little girls to bed. They share a room and sleep in bunk beds. While this whole process often stresses me out, it's one of my favorite things. Every night we follow the same routine: brush teeth, pajamas, read books, read bible story, pray, then lights out. And once the lights go out, they won't let me leave until I sing about fifty songs. As you can imagine, most of our songs come from *Moana* or *Frozen*—and yes, I know all the words. But one song I sing to them every night is the “Doxology.” And I have been singing it over them since they were born.

Many of you know this song: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise him all creatures here below; praise him above ye heavenly host; praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”

A doxology is a simple expression of praise to God. And this simple expression has the power to reorient our entire being and shape how we understand the world. I repeatedly sing this over our girls and our son because I want the core of their being to be oriented in praise toward God. I want them to know who God is. And I want them to understand themselves in light of who God is. Because I believe if doxology—praise to God—is at their core, they will be ready to face whatever life throws at them.

Our psalm for this morning, Psalm 100, is much like that. It's a doxology that reorders life. It has the power to shape us, to ready us for whatever comes our way. It's a doxology that we desperately need today.

Over the last few weeks, our church family has been looking at different psalms as we face the uncertain and troubling times we are in. For it's in the Psalms that we find the full expression of life. Here we learn to lament, seek understanding and perspective, and prayerfully petition God.

Today as we turn to Psalm 100 we learn that if we are going to face the times ahead we must be established in praise. If we want to face the uncertainty and troubles of our time with peace, trust, and joy, then we must learn how to praise.

I'm going to read Psalm 100 for us. But first I want to start with an application for this next week. Two small things: One, each morning this week, can you commit to reading this psalm? Or you could even listen to it set to music. Our Spotify playlist for this week includes a couple versions of Psalm 100 set to music. And two, each evening before bed can you commit to praying this psalm? It takes less time to read this psalm than it does to brush your teeth. But I believe the repetition of this psalm over the next week has the potential to change your heart. Let's look now at Psalm 100.

Psalm 100:1-5¹

¹Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!

²Serve the LORD with gladness!

Come into his presence with singing!

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

³*Know that the LORD, he is God!
It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

⁴*Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise!
Give thanks to him; bless his name!*

⁵*For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.*

This is the word of the Lord.

The psalms we've been reading over the last few weeks come from Book Four of the Psalms—a collection of psalms from Psalm 90-106 that are for God's people while they are in exile, while they are away from home, away from their place of worship.

So imagine, not just these six Sundays we've been away from church, and the three weeks since we've stayed away from family and friends. But rather imagine seventy years of separation from all that you know. This is what they were experiencing.

Which is what makes this psalm so ironic. Listen to what it says. Verse 4 says, "enter his gates and courts." It's asking people to enter the temple ... but there is no temple. Verses 1 and 2 invite them to be glad, but they are in desolation. Verses 3 and 5 tell them that God is sovereign and good, yet nothing they experience seems to corroborate that.

You may find yourself with similar emotions and questions. This psalm is for you.

Psalm 100 teaches us the what and the why of praise: what is involved in praise, and why should we do it. It gives us two whats and two whys.

WHAT: RIGHT PRAISE INVOLVES ALL THAT WE ARE.

We see this in verses 1 and 2. "Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!" The Hebrew here for noise emphasizes the loudness of this invitation. What happens when you try to make a loud noise? Go ahead. Wherever you're at make the loudest noise you can. (Parents, you're welcome.) Making a loud noise takes your whole body, every fiber of your being. And it's exhausting. This is the invitation for the *whole earth*. Imagine the noise in Arrowhead Stadium (the loudest arena in existence) extended across the whole earth! Right praise involves everything.

The next two instructions take this further. "Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!" Notice the emphasis here on our service, our gladness, and our singing. Service literally means work. The image is that of working for the Lord. That your skill, your vocation, is obedient to him. Then gladness speaks to our heart, our emotions. Singing, then, is that of spoken words, declarations of what we believe. In other words, our head, our heart, and our hands. The psalmist is speaking to all that you are: mind, body, soul. Right praise before God involves all that we are.

Here is why this is important. For some people, they sing songs of praise and experience such joy. They walk away thinking, what a powerful experience. But if praise doesn't reach down and change the fundamental patterns of their life, changing their obedience and will and work, then it's not really praise.

For others, they go through all the rituals, they know all the theological terms, they do all the right things and say all the right words, but they don't have any joy. They don't ever sense the beauty and wonder of God. This too is a faulty view of praise.

Praise involves your entire being. It is the alignment of all that you are in glorifying God.

Are you really praising God if your life isn't transformed? Are you really praising God if you don't know his joy, and mirth?

Now of course you don't always *feel* joyful. And changing life-patterns takes time. But you can see that when one of those things is missing the praise is not full.

But also, praise is one of the tools to make that happen. Bonhoeffer says that in the moments you don't feel like praying, those are the most important times to be praying.² Similarly, when you don't feel like praising God, when you feel like something is missing, those are the most important times to turn in praise.

Because praise is not only an expression that every aspect of our lives is in alignment with God, it is an act that shapes every part of who we are.

Praise softens our heart, turning our affections toward God. Praise molds our actions, making our service and our vocations an act of glorifying God. Praise transforms our minds, helping us to see and declare what is true about the world. If you want to see transformation in your life, if you want to know joy, learn to praise.

So how can we do this well? How can we learn to involve all that we are in praise?

1. Sing.

Seems obvious, but it had to be said. It's a clear call here, but you know as much as I do that music has a way of drawing you in, body and soul. It powerfully communicates. It's why here at First Free we sing the songs we do. Songs with rich lyrics extolling the greatness of God.

So in this time of separation from the gathered church, don't give up on singing. I hope you are singing along with us this morning. We've also provided a Spotify playlist each week with music for our church family to sing together while apart.

2. Engage with spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual disciplines are simply habits that engage our entire being so that God's grace may shape our entire being. There is no complete list, but a few include: engaging in the Word and prayer as primary, silence, fasting, frugality, service, and fellowship—yes even now (maybe more important now) you can call people or use Zoom.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

There are a host of others, but the disciplines are a way of engaging our entire being in praise to God.

3. Know the one to whom praise is given.

The implicit question in these instructions for praise is, who is the Lord? Who is deserving of that kind of devotion and worship?

As we turn to verse 3, we are given the answer and the first why for our praise.

WHY: BECAUSE GOD IS THE CREATOR AND SUSTAINER.

Friends, right praise involves all that we are brought before the God who created all that is.

In verse 3 we find the declaration to know that the LORD (Yahweh) is God. The following two lines then describe what it means for him to be God.

First, “he made us and we are his.” One of the most fundamental truths of the Christian faith is that one God is the creator of all, and that created beings are not gods in themselves. Thus, one of the most freeing things that praise does is to remind you that you are not God. It is incredibly freeing, and incredibly humbling. You are not God. You are not self-made. You are not in control, and you were never meant to be in the first place.

Now, this isn’t a license for passivity or inaction. Rather it is an acknowledgement that all too often we think of ourselves as self-made people who don’t need anyone. And even worse we are obsessed with getting control and keeping it, so that when we lose control (which always happens) it feels like the world is falling apart and all hope is gone. But this pursuit of total self-sufficiency and control stems from a lack of trust in God to be God. Therefore, praise puts us, creatures, in right relationship with our Creator.

Maybe you feel like the world is out of control. That your life is out of control. Maybe everything you put your trust in has been bankrupted. You can’t do the things you used to. Your kids are driving you nuts. You feel isolated and lonely.

Right praise puts life in right perspective: Rejecting ourselves as God. Rejecting the illusion of control. Rejecting anything else that would vie for our ultimate loyalty. Praise declares that our Lord is God, seated on his throne.

But look at the last line of verse 3. Because it takes it one step further. From the broad declaration that God is the creator, we are given a personal promise that we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Our praise declares that God is king, but not like a far-off king who doesn’t care. He is also not a king who rules like a tyrant, overbearing and burdensome. Rather our King rules his world and his people like a shepherd.

Recalling the imagery of Psalm 23 the good shepherd satisfies, protects, restores the soul, leads, provides rest, comforts, and desires our good and flourishing. Here we find the only reason we can praise and rejoice in the midst of fear and loss. That though we “walk through the valley of the shadow of death [we] will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (v. 4).

Friends, praise is joyous. But it's not a joy devoid of sorrow, rather a joy found even in sorrow. That's because praise teaches us that our God is creator and sustainer. Our king and our shepherd who walks with us through all life's trials.

That's the first set of what and why. Now verses 4 and 5 introduce us to another set.

WHAT: RIGHT PRAISE IS GROUNDED IN THANKSGIVING.

While praise involves all that we are, it is focused on all we've been given.

This week Pastor Josh had a great observation during our time of study. Often when we come to prayer, people will ask, "Any praises this week you want to share?" But what we are really asking is, "Do you have anything you are thankful for this week?" Because we intuitively know that right praise is grounded in thanksgiving.

We see this central call to thanksgiving clearly in verse 4. Notice how verse 4 picks up where verse 2 left off, using the same Hebrew word for "come" and "enter." It says: "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!"

Whereas verse 1 started out among all the earth, we are now brought within the gates and courts of the temple, thus into the very presence of God. And in the presence of God, the only response is thanksgiving. Notice how in the first two lines thanksgiving and praise are set in parallel, thus drawing them together and creating one concept.

They aren't really different concepts in the Old Testament.³ We often consider thanks as an individual act, like writing a thank you card to someone thanking them for what they have done. But in the Old Testament mindset, to thank someone is to sing their praises. It's a public declaration. It's posting your thank you note for all to see. It's calling others to know the same benefit you've found.

You know that friend you have who's always wanting you to try something that they love, something that has meant so much to them: You have to try this restaurant; I loved it. You have to listen to this song; it moved me. You have to try this game; it was so fun. This is a public praise of thanks that comes from the enjoyment in the good gift.

C. S. Lewis wrote, "all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise.... [And] The world rings of praise...."⁴ You can't help but publicly praise the things you are thankful for, the things that you delight in. It's just part of who we are as humans. And the best way to enjoy the good gifts of God is to turn them back into public thanksgiving—praise.

But then Lewis goes on to make the observation that those who seem to praise the most are the ones who are humble and balanced, "while the cranks, misfits and malcontents praised least." Lewis noticed that there is a direct correlation between the practice of thanksgiving and that of mental health, happiness, and joy.

But here's the thing, thanksgiving is not just the outcome of joy. The practice of thanksgiving can actually bring joy and contentment to your life.

³ For more on this see David Pao's book, *Thanksgiving: An Investigation of a Pauline Theme*, New Studies in Biblical Theology.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*

In an ongoing study out of UC Berkeley, researchers have identified that people who practice gratefulness are on average healthier and happier. They claim that in the midst of crisis gratitude is essential to overcoming your situation.⁵

Another researcher, Brene Brown, said it like this:

These are anxious and fearful times, both of which breed scarcity. We're afraid to lose what we love the most, and we hate that there are no guarantees. We think not being grateful and not feeling joy will make it hurt less. We think if we can beat vulnerability to the punch by imagining loss, we'll suffer less. We're wrong. There is one guarantee: If we're not practicing gratitude and allowing ourselves to know joy, we are missing out on the two things that will actually sustain us during the inevitable hard times.⁶

You see, various researchers are now learning what Christians have known forever, and what Psalm 100 calls us to. Public praise of thankfulness to God is essential to life.

There is often the critique that for God to ask for praise seems selfish and evil.⁷ But thankfulness is essential to life. Essential to our joy. Essential to our endurance. And essential to our relationship with God. Because if we believe (as we're going to read) that God stands at the center of all goodness, then by inviting us to thank and praise him, God is inviting us to enjoy him.⁸

How can we cultivate thanksgiving? I have a lot of ideas, but here are three.

1. Be specific.

Have you ever written a card with something like, "You're so wonderful, you wonderful you." Don't do that. Thanksgiving is concrete. It's rooted in reality. No matter how small or big the blessing, be specific.

This psalm assumes that the praise is personal to the individual or the community. That they are bringing thanks for a specific reason, a specific occurrence. If you are going to be thankful, be specific.

2. Create space to remember.

Admittedly this involves a lot. It involves time to reflect. Ways to remember. You could do this through journaling. For us the dinner table is one of the main times we reflect on the blessings and difficulties of our day.

Last Sunday evening some of our young adults had a Zoom meeting where they shared stories of God's blessing in their life. One of our community groups has this practice they call their feast of war. Here they share dinner and read the God sightings they've been collecting, thus praising and thanking God for his faithfulness and goodness. No matter what you do, create space for remembrance that leads to thankful praise.

⁵ See Berkeley's [Greater Good Science Center](#).

⁶ Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*

⁷ I was first introduced to this argument in Lewis' *Reflection on the Psalms*, though many others have made it as well.

⁸ My conclusion is a spinoff from what Lewis wrote in his *Reflections on the Psalms*: "In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him." John Piper makes a similar argument.

3. Know the source of all goodness.

You can only thank God if you believe he is the source of all goodness, if you believe that God stands at the center of all gratitude.

As we turn to verse 5, we are given the second why for our praise.

WHY: BECAUSE GOD'S GOODNESS KNOWS NO BOUNDS.

In the same way the psalmist declares our LORD is God, he now proclaims that the LORD is good.

It is one thing to say that our LORD is God. All powerful and sovereign. Deserving our obedience. But it is incredibly different to say that he is also good. Especially when all around you looks like God's goodness has left.

Psalm 89 ends Book Three of the Psalms in a dark place. After thirty-seven verses of recounting God's promises of love and faithfulness, verses 38-39 turn to question whether God's goodness is true: "But now you have cast off and rejected; you are full of wrath against your anointed. You have renounced the covenant with your servant; you have defiled his crown in the dust." He goes on to say in verse 46: "How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?"

Do you ever question God's goodness? Do you ever wonder, where is God in this situation?

Because when you get that difficult diagnosis. When you lose your job. When you are lonely and stuck at home. When all that you'd been planning for is no longer possible, it's easy to question whether or not God really is good. He might be all powerful, but is he good?

It's important to lament. Important to petition God. But it is also important to praise. Even if that praise comes through defiant tears. Because praise reminds us to be thankful to the God whose goodness knows no bounds.

Psalm 100 responds to all our questions about God's goodness. The Lord is good. Sometimes we just need that reminder. Because no matter how dark it gets, God's mercy and goodness can be found each and every day.

The next two lines of verse 5 then declare what it means for God to be good: "his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations." Just like the image of the shepherd, God's goodness to you means that his covenant love for you is eternal. And his faithfulness to you is the same faithfulness he had for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We are given a promise that God's faithfulness to his people never changes, never ends.

But more than a promise, we understand the fulfillment of God's covenant love and faithfulness. In sending Jesus, God fulfilled his promises. The eternal King has come to rule and reign. No power or authority is greater than him. He has defeated sin and death.

In sending Jesus, God showed his greatest love. For Jesus bore our sin and saved our soul, making himself the final sacrifice, taking on the guilt and punishment of our sin.

We are no longer trapped in our sin and our shame, but are freed to enjoy the goodness of his creation. His sacrifice is a gift to us. An expression of ultimate love for us. In sending Jesus, God

gave us a way to deal with any suffering or hardship in this life. We have a Savior who knows our pain and walks with us through our hardships. Who shows us it's ok to mourn and grieve. Who promises us a future hope, an eternal goodness and flourishing beyond our wildest imaginations.

In sending Jesus, God showed that his goodness knows no bounds.

From the smallest blessings we receive each day, to the eternal blessings that await, God's goodness knows no bounds.

I still have a lot of questions when it comes to why bad things happen. But praise teaches us that God is the center of all goodness. Both now and for all eternity. And whatever may come our way, "for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

Conclusion

We can see that praise engages our entire being in a joyous, public thanks to God for who he is and what he has done.

It is at the core of our relationship with God. By inviting us to thank and praise him, God is inviting us to enjoy him. But praise isn't just for your joy, it's also for your endurance. Praise forges in you the ability to encounter any obstacle that may come your way.

Allen Gardiner was a naval captain turned missionary in the 1800s, and the founder of the Patagonian Mission. In 1850 Gardiner along with six others sailed to the very southern tip of South America to spread the gospel. But after a series of unfortunate circumstances with their ships and their supplies they were left without provisions eventually succumbing to starvation.

Gardiner's journals were later found recalling their last days. In it we find that much of their time was spent in prayer and praise, ever ready to recognize with extreme thankfulness the smallest gifts from God.

Gardiner was the last to pass away and in his last journal entry he longs for when he will be with his family, "in a brighter and eternal world, [to] praise and adore [God's] goodness and grace, in redeeming us with His precious blood."⁹

Do you want to face life with this sort of confidence? Learn to praise. Learn to engage your entire being. Learn to publicly thank God. Know that God is sovereign and he is good.

⁹ While there are lots of places to find Gardiner's story, the [Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#) is the best.