

## “The Call to Praise in the Shadow of the Cross”

*Psalm 113*

Hallelujah!

We’re going to hear this word a lot over the next 6 Sundays as we study the Hallel Psalms, Psalms 113-118. The Hebrew word ‘Hallel’ means ‘praise’. ‘Yah’ is the short form of Yahweh – God’s actual name, and the ‘u’ is a preposition directing us to praise Yahweh the true God. The word means to be sincere and be deeply thankful for or satisfied in extolling a superior or great act of the person who treated us kindly. Sometimes the word is used to praise people, like in Prov.31:28 where the husband of the wise wife ‘praises’ her or that her works bring her ‘praise’ in the city gates (31:31). It is used to praise kings and knowledge and beauty. But most often *Hallel* is used towards God. And Hallelujah is actually a command to praise God and we’ll see why each week.

These are three groups of Hallel Psalms in the Book of Psalms. These six are specifically called the Egyptian Hallel because of Ps. 114 which talks specifically about Israel’s rescue from Egypt. And the context of the other psalms speak about redemption, hope and the Messiah. Psalms 120-135 is called the Great Hallel or better known as the Ascent Psalms. These were songs sung as the Israelites travelled to Jerusalem during one of the three main feasts they were commanded to attend (Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles). The final collection of Hallel psalms are found at the end, Psalms 146-150.

The reason why the Egyptian Hallel interests us now is because these were traditionally sung at the Passover, meaning Jesus would have sung these at the Last Passover /Supper. What did these psalms sing about? Were there prophetic implications to the crucifixion and resurrection in these songs? And how should that have impacted the disciples at the Last Passover listening to Jesus sing songs that actually spoke of suffering, redemption and Messianic hope? As we study these six Psalms, we’re going to study them from the perspective of what implications they had for the disciples as Jesus sang them Himself. And if they had implications for His disciples back then they obviously have implications for us, His disciples today.

Psalms are poems put to music sung most often in the context of Israel’s worship. They are not an epistle or a narrative, so we have to approach it differently. A psalm is usually somewhere on the pendulum of praise to lament; sometimes they begin with lament and move to praise. The psalms can also be looked at from the perspective of an individual or a community song. They often show a movement from disorientation/confusion/hurt (‘O Lord how long will you not listen/must I suffer’) towards an orientation/resolution/ hope (Yet I will hope in You, My Rock/ You are My God/ Surely your goodness and mercies will follow me . . .).

Some of the songs we have an understanding of the context because of the subtitles. Some were written for a King or about the King (Davidic) which are often Messianic psalms. Some are wisdom psalms like Ps. 19 and 119 praising God about the world and His Word. The unique thing about the psalms is that they are Holy Spirit inspired and yet spoken through a God-follower expressing their thanks or hurts to God. So, the Psalms invite us in to join the singer and say ‘Yes, that’s the way I feel too’ so that they orient us in the right direction towards trust or praise. The Psalms are also poetry so we have to understand that the writer is not always giving us information but expressing feelings, thoughts or a prayer, sometimes using language that may exaggerate his situation or express great hope/trust more as a prayer than a fact. For example, Ps. 91 is often referred to as the soldier’s psalm and people take too literally those verses that say ‘He will save you

from the fowler's snare or deathly pestilence or that ten thousand may fall at your side but it will not come near you.' This is poetry not promises. It is a confident prayer that the writer knows that God is always with him no matter what befalls him. And ultimately, from an eternal perspective, God's children will never spiritually die and we will live forever without diseases or death.

None of Psalms 113-118 have an author named or a context given. We can derive a context from within a few of these psalms which will help us. But we do know these psalms were sung traditionally at Passover and are tied to God's work of rescuing His people from Egypt but also from present and future distressing situations. Hallelujah commands us to praise God in vv.1-3, vv.4-6 tell us more about why God is worthy of praise and then vv.7-9 give us two ways what God can do for us that should result in our praising Him. Since Hallelujah is a command to praise God, that means we have a choice; will we praise God or will we not? I've oriented the outline into 3 questions related to the 3 sections of the psalm and applying it to us today as we examine it in the context of when Jesus sang this.

<sup>1</sup> *Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD, you his servants; praise the name of the LORD.*

<sup>2</sup> *Let the name of the LORD be praised, both now and forevermore.*

<sup>3</sup> *From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the LORD is to be praised.*

Here the psalmist commands us at least 4 times to praise the Lord essentially at all times. So,

## **Will We Praise the Lord at All Times?** **(113:1-3)**

These six songs were sung at the Passover feast. We know from Jewish writings from around the time of Jesus that traditionally Psalms 113-114 were sung at the beginning of the meal while Ps. 115-118 were sung at the end of the meal. When Jesus begins the Passover, hours before His crucifixion, He sang and said it is always right to praise God at all times. Since Jesus is part of the Trinity and the Logos – the Word of God – He had a roll in overseeing the writing of this very Scripture and He was modelling to His disciples – who were oblivious to the future suffering awaiting them around the corner that it is always appropriate to praise God. To extol the superiority of God and His good acts towards us. Even the cross? Absolutely in His sovereign plan.

Notice the psalmist is adamant that we praise the Lord!

*Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD, you his servants; praise the name of the LORD.*

Servants is not an appeal to those working in the temple but an appeal to everyone who has made the choice with their life to serve God. And which God? *Yahweh* – that's His Name. In Jewish culture your name identifies what kind of person you are or what kind of person your parents pray you to be. Three times we read of God's Name and praise here. God told Moses what His Name was in Ex. 3:14 "I am who I am" or 'I am the self-existing One'. The Lord, *Yahweh*, is the Only True God. As such He deserves our praise. We are created by Him. In His mercy and grace, He gave us life and purpose if we have chosen to believe in Him and serve Him.

Three quick statements each building on one another, stressing the importance of praising the One True God (even if you do know of suffering on the horizon or not). And then v.2 is slightly different. The word praise in v.2 is not hallel but barak, the usual word for bless. Because when we praise God no matter what is going on in our life,

***We bless God with our praise (vv.1-2)***

There are many places in the Old Testament (especially Psalms) where we are commanded to 'bless' the Lord. Ps. 103 tells us six times to bless the Lord because of the many benefits give to us (NIV says praise instead). 'Bless' has the idea of empowering and wishing abundant living upon. When we praise God, we bless Him in that we acknowledge His goodness to us but we also want to see His power and goodness displayed even more. God feels blessed (ironically) when He hears our praise. And v.3 tells us

### ***Praise has no time or place limitations (v.3)***

*From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the LORD is to be praised.*

Refers to every location on earth. There is no place where it is inappropriate to praise God. Why? Because God is there. Even in difficult places where evil abounds? Yes, because God is greater than evil and can rescue us from the most difficult situations if we trust Him.

The rising and setting of the sun also refers to time. That's how we basically tell time; day time and night time. But when its night here, its day somewhere else and vice versa. Ps. 121 says God doesn't sleep so no matter where the sun is (or not) is at any time. Who of us hasn't woken in the middle of the night and prayed to God? It never crosses our mind that He's sleeping too, does it?

As Jesus sings this song of praise to God, He knows He's only hours away before His arrest, His all-night trials (was God with Him in the night? Yes!) and ultimately His crucifixion. The disciples will recognize this afterward but they will fail to praise God in their difficulties that night. God saw the plight of the Israelites in Egypt; this is what the context of the Psalm is supposed to be. We can praise Him no matter what. Why?

<sup>4</sup> *The LORD is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens.*

<sup>5</sup> *Who is like the LORD our God, the One who sits enthroned on high,*

<sup>6</sup> *who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?*

The Psalmist tells us now why we should praise God, because He is exalted over every human power and even though He sits so high up He has to stoop to look down on the heavens (the universe and our atmosphere) let alone the earth, He does see His people and wants to help us. But do we believe God loves us and wants to serve us?

## **Do You Believe God Humbles Himself to Serve You?** **(Ps. 113:4-6)**

Sometimes its hard to believe that because we look at our problems and wonder 'Where is God? Doesn't He care? Doesn't He know what I'm going through? Why doesn't He do something?' The Israelites in Egypt wondered the same thing. For 400 years. But God was waiting for the right time and the right deliverer to come on the scene and be the shepherd of His people, Moses. And many people doubted and rejected Moses as their leader, as God sent.

This is the amazing thing about the true God. The gods the nations worshipped never actually did anything for their supposed people. They were distant, unmoving and did not communicate. However, the real God, the Creator God – Yahweh is greater than them all. He is exalted above the nations. In other words, He is more powerful and more compassionate. You can try and trust world powers to make life better for you but at some point, they will fail. Why? Because they rarely care for the people they are called to serve. God is greater than any world leader or nation. Unlike people,

### ***His greatness increases His care (vv.4-5)***

He may have to stoop down to see His people but at least He does! At the Passover Israelites celebrate what God did for them. That He saw their plight. That He sent Moses and Aaron to be His voice. That He sent plagues that set His people apart from the Egyptians and then ultimately drowned them in the Red Sea after He led His people miraculously through it.

Yet one of the promises God made to Israel after the Exodus was that there would be another Moses. In Deut 18:15,

*<sup>15</sup> The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him. ... <sup>18</sup> I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him. <sup>19</sup> I myself will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name.*

How much does God care for His people?

### ***He even came in person (v.6)***

Here was Jesus singing this psalm to celebrate God's deliverance from the Egyptians and saying that God stoops down to help His people. And there He was, God in the flesh! He became one of us in order to help us escape the slavery of sin. Oh how the disciples must have just kicked themselves afterwards when they realized Jesus was singing this psalm about God's humbling Himself to help His people. The apostle Paul captured it perfectly when he wrote of Jesus in Phil 2:5-9

*<sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped; <sup>7</sup> but made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!*

God cares so much about us that He sent His Son to become one of us, to die on the cross for our sins and offer forgiveness from slavery to sin so that, by faith we will one day get to spend eternity with Him in a better promised land called the new earth.

But like the Jews who celebrate Passover and look back at the exodus and face their own trials, and like us who look back on the cross believing by faith it happened, but we have our own problems and trials today

## **Will We Trust God to Reverse our Circumstances?** **(Ps. 113:7-9)**

The psalmist gives us some examples:

*<sup>7</sup> He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; <sup>8</sup> he seats them with princes, with the princes of their people. <sup>9</sup> He settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children.*

God is the champion of the poor, the barren and the widows. What did God do for the Israelites at the exodus? He turned the tables. He made the Egyptians servants to the Israelites. God destroyed Pharaoh and his armies and made Israel the victors. Israel left Egypt with the spoils of war.

There are other examples in Scripture where God took the oppressed and harassed like Abigail, Daniel, Esther, Mordecai, Elizabeth and reversed the tables on those who oppressed them. Only months after Jesus will sing this song at the last supper, the disciples will stand confidently before religious authorities and defend their faith in Jesus without shame, and the authorities are bewildered by their boldness. Peter will miraculously escape a jail cell, as will Paul and Silas. And so we see many times in our own lives as well where God ...

### ***Meets our needs beyond our imagination (vv.7-8)***

Of course, the psalmist alludes to the reversal of fortunes for the barren women of Scripture. Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah and later in the New Testament Elizabeth. Read Hannah's song in 1 Sam. 2 and you hear an echo of these verses. Read Mary's song in Luke 1 and we hear an echo of these verses.

God can do exceedingly abundantly beyond what we can ask or imagine. Let's come back to Jesus singing this just hours before His crucifixion. The disciples will think their world has ended with the death of Jesus. Jesus knows He will have to suffer but He also knows what the future holds; resurrection. The disciples will change completely through their belief in the resurrection of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

God may not always reverse our circumstances in this life, but in our own resurrection there waits for us an imperishable inheritance, a life without pain or suffering that will never end, where we will sit not just with worldly princes but with the Prince of Peace Himself. And what we find is, when we trust God's promises to keep us and save us, He

### ***Makes us secure and joy-filled (v.9)***

In the culture of Jesus' day, the lack of a child brought shame. There was a sense of incompleteness. We see it in the taunts that Hannah faced from Elkanah's other wife. From Leah to Rachel. But God's blessing of the child in that day 'settles the woman in her home'. The word means security. And filled her with joy. Yes, the child brings her joy but this is an illustration used by the psalmist to describe the joy and security God gives us, just like He opens the barren womb and provides life.

The Passover then begins with praising God for His past acts of deliverance, for His faithfulness to His people to do what He has promised. But every year when you celebrate the Passover life continues and there are new problems, new hurdles to overcome, present needs and present circumstances to reverse. And many people might begin Passover as Jesus did, singing praises to God at all times, in every place in trust that the great God, high and exalted, does see our plights and needs and will serve us (even though we don't deserve His grace and mercy). How do we know He will? Because Jesus already came and suffered in our place, taking the punishment meant for us for our sins and holds out His hand and invites us to '*Come to Him all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest, Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*' (Matt. 11:28-29).

Every Sunday we gather together and sing praises to God, and some Sundays we look back on our week and praise God for answers to prayer, for reversing our circumstances, for strengthening our security and joy. But maybe this morning you're still waiting for those answers and you're singing

praises by faith, believing the God who humbled Himself in Jesus still has your life secure and will do beyond what you can imagine right now.

And maybe this morning we're like the disciples at the last Passover, singing praises with their Lord, totally oblivious to the difficulties and tests of their faith looming in the near future. So, the psalm challenges us every day to meditate on those 3 questions; will I praise God at all times, will I believe He will humble Himself to meet my needs and will I trust Him to reverse my circumstances?

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