

“Praise the Lord!”

One of the ancient catechisms (teaching tools) of the Church described our human destiny in this way: “The chief end of man is *to glorify God* and to enjoy Him forever.” We were created to praise and honor and glorify God! Jesus Himself, near the end of His earthly life, prayed: “I have glorified you on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do” (John 17:4). There is something basic about our need to praise God!

All creation is meant to praise God! But God’s people in a special way are to live a life that brings praise and honor to God! God calls Israel “the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise” (Isaiah 43:21). In the Old Testament, Israel’s mission was to be a people who would bring glory to God. When Israel failed, that mission was given to the Church: 1 Peter 2:9 says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

There’s a beautiful passage in Ephesians that says this is one of the reasons why we been created and redeemed: “He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved...so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the *praise of his glory*” (Ephesians 1:5-6, 12).

The Old and New Testaments are crammed full of words telling us to praise God and to give Him honor and glory! There are way too many verses to even begin to cover! But here are a few. Psalm 96:8 says, “Ascribe to the Lord *the glory due his name...*”. Psalm 92:1 reads: “It is good to give thanks to the Lord, *to sing praises* to your name, O Most High.” Psalm 22:3 suggests that God inhabits the praises of His people! God is especially present when His people praise Him!

Why is it that Christians don’t praise the Lord more? Why are we afraid, or embarrassed, or just not motivated to praise God? Some of us are just not accustomed to doing that. Sometimes I’ve done a prayer experiment. I say, “When we pray, let’s not ask for anything – but just thank and praise God.” And you know, it’s very hard! Usually we wind up asking for something.

I remember once in a church I served where people in the church were visiting an inactive member of our congregation. They shared with the person their enthusiasm for what was happening in the church, and their own faith. In the course of conversation, they let out with a couple of “Praise the Lord’s”. Later, I happened to see this inactive member, and this person said in effect that the two persons visiting had “flipped their lid”, and were “out in left field”. But I say, “Praise the Lord” for these believers who were not ashamed to praise Jesus!

I learned a lot about praising the Lord from a pastor of mine, Rocky Riedel. He had a habit of saying “Praise the Lord”. As he got up in years and once I moved back to the Lancaster area he and I used to meet every once in a while for breakfast. One of these times I told him how much he had influenced my life for Christ, and how much I appreciated him. Guess what his response was? He quietly said, “Praise the Lord”.

I believe God wants us to live a lifestyle filled with praise for Him! Psalm 71 is an older person's prayer for deliverance – and it includes *praise to God*. This psalm teaches us much about praising God!

It tells us when to praise the Lord. "My praise is continually of you...my mouth is filled with your praise, and with your glory all day long...my mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all day long" (Psalm 71:6b, 8, 15). When should we praise the Lord? *Continually!* Of course, this doesn't mean we walk around all day saying nothing but "Praise the Lord", "Praise the Lord"! (We do this and we'd probably wind up in some mental health facility). Praising the Lord continually doesn't suggest that we do nothing else in life. But rather this should be an *attitude* that we carry around throughout the day and night! I once read a book where the author asks whether we want to live on Grumbling Street or Praise Avenue! It's so easy to complain and grumble, isn't it, to be picky and negative – to live on Grumbling Street. How much more pleasant when we live on Praise Avenue! Psalm 34:1 says, "I will bless the Lord *at all times*, his praise shall *continually* be in my mouth."

If we're going to praise God continually, that means we praise God even when things aren't going well. There's really nothing special if things are going great and we praise the Lord. But can we praise God when things are falling apart? When bad things happens? When life stinks?

Years ago a military chaplain named Merlin Carothers wrote a number of books on praise. What he was trying to teach us – out of his own experience – was that we should praise God not only *in* bad situations, but *for* bad things. The basis for his thinking is this verse in Ephesians: "Always giving thanks to God the Father *for* everything" (Ephesians 5:20). I read one of his books, *Prisoner to Praise* (his autobiography), and I have to admit, I found some parts of the book a bit difficult to accept and agree with. But he does relate some amazing, unbelievable things God does when we are willing to praise Him in the worst of circumstances – that somehow our praising God unleashes the power of God to work in mysterious, sometimes thrilling, ways. He tells of a young mother who came to him wanting to divorce her husband. Carothers told her he didn't care whether she divorces him or not, but she was to praise God for the situation. She did, and God did a remarkable thing to heal that couple's relationship.

Maybe you are thinking, "When things are going bad, praising God is the *last thing* I feel like doing". But Carothers maintains: "Praising (God) is not something we do because we feel good; rather it is an act of obedience." So, praise God in all circumstances. Even the bad. Even though things may temporarily get worse, keep on praising, and the power of God can be released to intervene. Have you ever experienced the "power of praise" in this way?

I had friend who published a new Christian magazine called *Vine Life*. My friend invested everything he had in this venture. He mortgaged his home. He put a great amount of money into the start of this magazine. Then it failed. My friend Rich met with the other parties involved and attorneys, and decided to disband the magazine. He told me he walked out of that meeting, having lost everything. But he felt the need to praise the Lord, even though there was no reason to do that. So he started praising God. Just then his attorney called from across the parking lot.

He asked my friend, “Which bank holds the mortgage on your house?” Rich gave him the name. His attorney said he would buy the house so Rich could remain in the home. He would charge him the lowest interest rate allowed by law. Rich could pay him back as he was able, and even if he was never able to pay the man back, that would be OK.

Eventually my friend paid the amount back in full. Looking back, Rich told me that though he had lost hundreds of thousands of dollars, he afterward praised God for what happened. He felt that if he had been successful, he would have become caught up in money. This way, he said, he was closer to the Lord.

When we praise God during difficult circumstances, certain things can happen. One is that it helps us focus on God – God’s greatness, God's power – and gets our mind off the problem, and our own weakness and inadequacy. Another is that it helps create in us a different attitude – a much more positive, hopeful outlook. Still another result of our praising God even in difficult times is the whole matter of how praising God might just set in motion spiritual laws and forces that we just don’t understand yet.

Psalms 71 (and other Scriptures) tell us to praise God *continually*. Psalm 71 also reveals that ***there are different ways to praise the Lord***. Verses 22-23 say, "I will also praise you with the harp for your faithfulness, O my God; I will sing praises to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel. My lips will shout for joy when I sing praises to you; my soul also, which you have rescued." The psalmist will praise God with the harp and lyre (musical instruments), and with his lips (his words).

An obvious way to praise God is in public worship. Every worship service ought to be a time when we glorify and praise the Lord – whatever style of worship we use, whether it is formal, liturgical, informal or contemporary. Some people in worship prefer praising the Lord quietly, with little body movement. Others love to praise the Lord in a more loud and demonstrative way. Each is OK as long as it is sincere.

I do think that most of us in mainline Protestant churches tend to be too inhibited! Bruce Larson tells of the time when his congregation decided to celebrate Sunday worship by using helium-filled balloons to represent praise and thanks to God. People were told, “Any time you feel like it, let your balloon go, and that’ll represent your saying, “Praise God”, or “Thank you, God”. All through the service balloons kept floating up at different times, as though to say, “Hey, that’s great, Lord. Praise you!” But at the end of the service, about a third of the people were still clutching their balloons! Some of us need to be freed up to praise God more in worship!

But praising God isn’t something we do just in church. There are, of course, many other ways to praise and glorify God! We can do so by praising God in our private prayers, or by saying "Praise the Lord" throughout the day as we go about our work or see something that makes us want to praise Him. We praise God by using our talents and gifts to bring honor to God. Scottie Scheffler is an up and coming 25 year-old golfer who just won the Masters. He told the media after his big win, "The reason why I play golf is I'm trying to glorify God and all that He's

done in my life. So for me, my identity isn't a golf score."

And, of course, we praise God by living a godly life, consistent with what we profess. This is expressed by the Apostle Paul in his words to the Philippians: "May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation – the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ – *for this will bring much glory and praise to God.*" (Philippians 1:11 (New Living Translation). What will bring much glory and praise to God? The righteous character, the love, that flows from us because Christ lives in us! We all know how much of a turnoff it is if someone goes around praising the Lord, but isn't living a very Christlike life.

We see something else in Psalm 71. The writer of this psalm **wants to grow in his ability to praise God.** Verse 14 says, "But I will hope continually, and will praise you yet more and more." How can we grow in our ability to praise God? *The beginning point is to come to know Christ and experience salvation and new life through Him.* Hebrews 13:5 relates to this: "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that *confess his name.*" If you don't know Jesus, you probably have little motivation to praise God. But when we have experienced His forgiveness, and new life, praise can spring from a thankful heart!

We can also grow in our ability to praise God *when we take time to meditate on the greatness, power, love, and awesomeness of our God.* We so easily get dragged down by the routine of living, and our worries and problems, that we lose sight of the greatness of God.

Then too, we grow in being a "praise the Lord" kind of person when we *practice praising Him!* Don't be so hesitant or self-conscious. Just do it! Let it become a habit!

Do you realize that we're going to be praising God in heaven! The Book of Revelation provides imagery of what heaven will be like: "After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God'...and from the throne came a voice saying, 'Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great.' Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, 'Halleljuah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.' Let us exult and give him the glory" (Revelation 19:1, 5-7a). Think about it: How in the world will we feel at home in heaven, where God is praised, if we haven't done much of that here on earth!

The reason you and I were created is to praise and glorify our Creator! The reason we were redeemed by Christ is to be a people who praise this Lord, who gave His life for our sins! St. Augustine once remarked, "The Christian should be an alleluia from head to foot."

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