

The Hallelujah or Praise Psalms

The “hallelujah” or praise psalms comprise a significant portion of the Book of Psalms. The word “hymn” especially speaks of a song of praise. Such psalms or hymns seek to declare God’s goodness and mercy and declare His power, majesty, and mercy.

Hallelujah

This word means “praise the Lord” and is comprised of two parts:

Hallelu = praise

Jah = shortened form of Jehovah or Yahweh (God)

Alleluia = Greek equivalent?

This being a major component of worship, these psalms can be most useful in accomplishing Christian worship today.

Praise or adoration or celebration is the concept behind this portion of the psalms. The psalmists, and we through imitation, acclaim, extol, commend, and applaud God, His attributes, and works. Thus, at least a portion of the Psalms can be viewed as a hymnal or songbook. The New Testament instructs us to speak to one another “in *psalms*, hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19). Similarly, we are instructed in Colossians 3:16

that we are to teach and admonish one another “in *psalms* and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” And, James 5:13 says, in part, “Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing *psalms*.”

Sigmund Mowinckel has written, “The core of the hymn of praise is the consciousness of the poet and congregation that they are standing face to face with the Lord Himself, meeting the Almighty, holy and merciful God in His own place, and worshipping Him with praise and adoration . . . to express what the congregation is seeing and feeling, and to increase His glory in the world.”

There are five different Hebrew words which are all translated *praise* in our Bibles. Each demonstrates a different taste, style or flavor of praise. But, each finds in common an intense enthusiasm and energy. There is nothing reserved, reticent, or ambiguous about the Hebrew praise psalms. This is an important lesson to 21st century Christians.

The five words mentioned above are:

1. Hallel. This word occurs 99 times in the Old Testament,

33 of those in the Psalms. It means to “celebrate, to laud, to boast.” It is the root of the word *hallelujah*.

2. Yadah. This word means to worship with extended hands, raised arms.

3. Barak. Means to declare God as the origin of power, success, or victory and recognizes Him as the source of all things

4. Shabach. This is to shout or commend *loudly*. Notice again the lack of reserve. One does not have to “lose control” to express praise unreservedly.

5. Gil. This term means to circle in joy, to dance in circles. We have no New Testament instruction to dance, but Israel did have such.

Place of Praise Hymns in the Book of Psalms

We previously have studied the “lament” psalms. It is important to see the relationship between those and the praise psalms we now explore. C. Hassell Bullock observes, “The emotional disposition of the Psalter alternates between praise and lament, but the nature of the Psalter is such that the power of gravitation is in the direction of praise.”

As we observed in the lament psalms, the lament is directed toward God and elicits hope for God’s help, which in turn draws from the

Modern Praise Hymns

- “Hallelujah, praise Jehovah”
- “Hallelujah, what a Savior”
- “Praise Him, Praise Him”
- “Praise the Lord”
- “Alleluia”
- “How great Thou art”
- “Lift up your voice in praise”
- “Jesus, name above all names”



human heart praise of the One who can alleviate, empower, and cause us to overcome. Someone has suggested that sighing is turned into singing through prayer.

We observed in Lesson Two that the book of Psalms appears to be divided into five books. When looking at the relationship between the psalms of lament or complaint and the psalms of praise, we observe that the former outnumber the latter in the first three books of psalms, and the latter outnumbers the former in the last two books. It would seem that praise is the goal toward which the whole book moves. Doxologies of praise conclude each of the five books, with the great hymn of praise (150) calling for “everything that has breath (to) praise the LORD. Praise the LORD!”

Importance of Praising God

The importance of praising God cannot be over emphasized. In fact, it is arguable that the very purpose for human existence is the praise of God. The apostle Paul wrote, “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). This recalls the words of Solomon, “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear (*respect*, rb) God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all” (Eccl. 12:13).

That praise of God is more important than sacrifice is expressed in Psalm 69:30-31:

*I will praise the name of God with a song,
And will magnify Him with thanksgiving.*

*This also shall please the LORD
better than an ox or bull,
Which has horns and hooves.*

Praise, by its very nature, elevates another person, focuses away from self and directs the attention of others to the one being praised. Praise often is conjunctive, calling upon others to join in the praise.

Praise of God seeks to increase the sense of His power and renown in the minds of human beings. It is not that God needs a slap on the back or an ego boost, but that we need to see Him as He is and as our ultimate source of strength. Through praise He becomes our ultimate standard, model, and hope. Praise likewise produces such a vision of God in others. The primary mood of such praise is joy, enthusiasm, and adoration.

Human beings almost spontaneously praise whatever they value or care about. We are compelled to praise something and almost invariably do. And, it is arguable that praise is not only an expression of joy but completes the enjoyment.

Nothing and no one deserves such praise more than God.

The Content of Praise Is Important

Much is done today that is called “praise music” or “praise worship,” but lacks any serious content. It may be comprised largely of shouting, dance-like swaying, and verbalization of the words “praise the Lord” or “hallelujah.” Often these calls to praise are without much context or substantive content.

Such was not the case with the praise psalms of the Old Testament. Praising the Lord was more than the mere summons to praise or the expression of intent to praise, which often do introduce a praise hymn, but the call or statement of intent was followed by the actual praise. And, that praise concretely identified the reasons for which God ought to be praised, and the enunciation of those reasons became the praise itself.

So, even today, it is fine to call upon others to “praise the Lord,” but realize that the call is not the praise. The praise comes as we extol the characteristics and action of God that call for praise. Thus, praise is not simply an emotional expression (though it should entail emotion), but also is instructive.

Two Major Categories of Praise Psalms

Two basic types of praise psalms are found in Psalms. One type might be described as “declarative praise” and the other as “descriptive praise.” The first involves generic language like “Praise the Lord” without as much detail of why or what the psalmist is praising. Descriptive praise, on the other hand, details the cause for praise. Some psalms begin with the more generic approach and transition to greater detail.

Write a Praise Hymn

Using the 3-step pattern here described, write a praise hymn that extols God for something He has done for you.

General Form of the Praise Psalms

Generally speaking, the praise psalms follow a form with distinct elements.

1. **An exhortation or call to praise or worship.** The exhortation may seek to include others, such as “O come, let us sing” or it may be more personal, as in “I will praise the Lord” or some similar expression. Where others are exhorted, they may be named, such as the Lord’s servants, Jacob (or Zion’s) sons, the faithful, the righteous or “they that fear the Lord.” In these exhortations, God’s name is always mentioned, often with grand appellations. The exhortation may begin with an *exclamation*, such as “O LORD, our Lord, How excellent is Your name in all the earth” (Psa. 8:1) or with a *statement* (Pss. 76:2; 48:2; 46:2).

2. **Main body of the hymn.** The body of the hymn often begins with words like “for” or “because” and then lists reasons, usually in a series of short sentences, why He should be praised. These reasons usually entail a great deed God has done (especially His acts in history) or some quality of His divine character. Repetition for emphasis is common.
3. **Conclusion.** The conclusion often is virtually identical to the exhortation, usually calling for and stating the praise of God.

Major Themes in Psalms of Praise

The things for which God can be praised are innumerable, yet a review of the psalms shows that some themes are often repeated. They include:

1. Praise of God as Creator—Psalms 8, 19a, 33, 104, and 136
2. Praise of God as King—Psalms 47, 93, 96, 97, 98, 99
3. Praise of God during harvest—Psalms 65 and 145
4. Praise of God looking to His action in history—Psalms 105, 106, 114, 135, and 136
5. Praise of God as He is approached in worship—Psalms 24, 95, and 100

The Hallelujah Psalms

There are ten psalms in this group. They are 106, 111, 112, 113, 135, and 146-150. Each of these psalms begins with the expression “hallelujah” or “praise the Lord.” And, all but two of them end with the same expression.

Read **Psalm 106** and make a list of:

- a. **The things God did worthy of praise** _____

b. Laudable characteristics of

God: _____

Read **Psalm 111** and then list at least six things for which God is praised. _____

Read **Psalm 148** and explain what you think the psalmist is trying to say. _____

Other Praise Psalms

Not all the praise psalms begin with the unique nature of those mentioned above, but they nevertheless are focused on praising God. They include Psalms 8, 29, 33, 36, 117, and 136.

Read **Psalm 8**. What do you see as the focus of the psalmist’s praise? _____

Now, read, Hebrews 2:5-9, where a portion of this psalm is quoted.

What is contrasted in **Psalm 36** that brings forth praise of God? _____

Psalm 117 is the shortest of all the psalms and is a call for Gentiles to praise God.

Psalm 136 is a praise psalm that accomplishes its purpose by a repetition of what statement?

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. Using a dictionary if needed, write a definition of “worship.” _____

Now, explain how each of the five acts of Christian worship fulfill this definition.

Prayer: _____

Giving: _____

Preaching/reading the word: _____

Singing: _____

Communion: _____

Do you believe our worship today adequately expresses the joy of salvation, hope of heaven, and adequate thanksgiving and praise to the source of all spiritual blessings? _____

Be ready to explain your answer in class. _____

2. How do we “praise” God? Is it sufficient to simply sing “Praise Him, Praise Him!” or is more required? _____

3. Explain any connection you see between our laments or complaints and praise of God. _____

4. Who benefits, in your estimation, from the praising of God? _____

5. What is the point of the word *hallelujah* or the phrase *praise the Lord*? (check one or more)

- It is a word or phrase that praises God
- It is a call for others to begin the action of praising God
- Both
- Other

6. For what do you think God deserves the greatest praise? _____

Why? _____

7. For what reasons do we usually praise other fellow human beings? _____

Are these the same or different from the reasons we praise God? _____