

Psalm 146
Praising and Trusting Our Generous and Compassionate God

The book of Psalms is called the Prayer Book of the church. It has been used by the people of God for thousands of years to sing and to pray. It is divided into 5 books: 1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106; and 107-150. The last verse of each section or book ends with the words “Blessed be the Lord...” Psalms 145-150 are called the Hallelujah psalms because each of them begins and ends with the word Hallelujah. Today, I’m taking for my text psalm 146, a psalm of praise.

Behind the Psalms:

Many of the Psalms are given titles in our Bible telling us what the situation in life they came from was. For example, Psalm 51 says: “To the leader, A Psalm of David when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone into Bathsheba.” That’s what some people thought anyway. But the important point is this: Song composers always have a situation or story that inspires them to tell of that experience in song. Like this one funny example: **“My best friend’s wife is the love of my life and I don’t know what to do about it”**. Can you guess what the story is behind this one? The Psalms also are songs about situations that happen to the people of God. Psalms of praise are no different. It’s not certain what situation in life gave rise to psalm 146. But it’s not hard to see who God is in this psalm and to praise this God.

Likewise with our modern hymns and songs:

Many of our church hymns have stories behind them too. For example, Horatio G. Spafford wrote “It is well with my soul” after he lost 4 daughters after the ship they were on collided with another ship and 20 minutes later the sea billows had taken them. Before that he had lost a son. The song goes like this: “When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll. Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well with my soul”. He is telling the story of his loss and God sustaining him.

Whoever wrote Psalm 146 knows God and has enjoyed the grace of God in his life and seen it in others’ lives. Perhaps it was on one of those occasions when he saw God at work that praise filled his heart and he wrote his song. He then shared it with the congregation and it became a favorite. He remembered how God helps the poor, sets the prisoner free, cares for the oppressed, and the stranger. Perhaps he knew a time in his life when he was hungry. Perhaps this psalm was written when the people of God were in exile from their land. When the Babylonians had invaded their land, took away their economy, made them work in their palaces. At any rate, praise springs up and voila Psalm 146 is born. It’s like he is answering God’s love with praise. This Psalmist knows how to live praiseful. I want to live a praiseful life too! Don’t you?

We have continued this tradition in the church for thousands of years. We too gather and we sing and we answer the goodness of our God with praise. That’s worth a song. Not the friend who loves his friend’s wife! The house sells after months of waiting. The prodigal child straightens up. The cancer goes away or we experience God’s goodness during the treatment of it. The money to pay the mortgage comes in just in time. Someone offered to clean your home.

Paul says to the church in the city of Colossae that praise ought to be part of their gathered life: “sing Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to the Lord from your hearts. Do it with hearts full of gratitude.” Colossians 3:16.

Here’s a way to read the psalms I would encourage: today is the 2nd. So you would read 5 psalms: 2, 32,62,92,122. Tomorrow is the 3rd. So you would read 3,33,63,93,123. If you can count by 30 you can do this. In a month, you would have read all the psalms. Repeat for life. Then we can honestly say: The Psalms are the prayer book of the church. When you read the Psalms regularly, you will experience every thought and every emotion known to man. It’s all here. One day you sing about how majestic God’s name is in all the earth. The next you ask him to kill off your enemy’s children by throwing them against a rock. In the psalms, the emotions are raw and real. They are our answer to God in times of peace and war. And that barrel of emotional answers has no bottom. Read the psalm and learn the language of the emotions. God knows this language.

I made friends with a man who was addicted on cocaine for years. He didn’t want to be. He fought it hard. He had a great heart, which at one time he had given to God. After a year of working together he told me after he beat the addiction that his only salvation was when he used to lie down on his couch and cry out to God the words the Psalmists often used: “How long O God”? God heard his cry and delivered him. These prayers made the difference for him and changed him.

Now to our Psalm. Psalm 146 has 4 sections to it. In verses 1-2 we see that a lifetime full of praise is a commitment we could all make. In verses 3-4 we see that it’s possible to misplace our trust. Trust is a precious jewel God gives us... We must be careful how and where we invest it. Where we set the jewel. Trust belongs to God’s kingly crown alone. In verses 5-9 we see that God is a good king who is extremely generous in his dealings with his people. We can trust him because he is a good and generous God. In the last verse, verse 10, we see that our destiny is to praise God forever and ever.

So let’s look at each section one by one.

Verses 1-2. First word is **Hallelujah**. WE took it inot English without translating it. In Hebrew it is two words. “Hallelu” which means “all of you together give praise or sing praise.” The second word is “Yah” which is the short version for the name of God in the OT, which is Yahweh... The name means “I Am that I Am.” Congregation and my soul: Give praise to God.

“Praise the Lord **O my soul.**” What is the soul? In this psalm, the soul is that part of ourselves that we can talk to, that can obey what we say to it. You could say he is talking to himself. Human beings are the only creatures who are given that ability when God breathed into us his living Spirit or breath. We can talk to ourselves and listen to ourselves, we can think about ourselves. That’s soul work. Only humans do that work. You’ll never see a dog on a porch at night wondering or questioning itself “I wonder if I have saved enough bones for my retirement. Do more of that for the next few years, O my soul.” But we, made in the image of

God, have the ability to address ourselves, to speak to ourselves, to say things to ourselves, to remind ourselves. We tell ourselves good things with an ear bent upward and inward.

What has been your conversation with your soul like this week? What worries are occupying your soul? What hope did your soul cause you to have? What faith learning have you done? Did you finally settle that dispute with yourself whether you should apologize for the things you said or not? Our soul, shaped by Christ, is a wonderful conversation partner. Give Jesus a chance and he will restore your soul. Take a walk, get alone and get quiet by turning off the noise in your house, in your car. You'll find your soul a ready listening partner.

But now that he has reminded himself, he makes a commitment and intentional decision and plan to a life of praise.

A word on Hebrew poetry:

I will praise the Lord as long as I live
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Have you ever wondered why the psalms are formatted on the page as if they were poems, or songs? It's because they are. But Hebrew poetry doesn't work like most English poetry. In English poetry, usually you have words that rhyme. For example:

Roses are red.
Your blood is too.
You look like a monkey
And belong in a zoo.
Do not worry, I'll be there too.
Not in the cage, but laughing at you.
Or
Roses are red
Violets are blue
Sugar is bad for me
And so are you!

What makes Hebrew poetry different is that rhyming is not there. Two or three lines follow each other and each one says a little more than the previous to complete a thought started in the previous line. Just like in verse 2. The second line repeats the same thought as the first line with a couple of words added to expand on the idea in line 1.

Now a word about praise and thanksgiving. Praise is what we say when we want to point out the qualities and greatness of a person. Thanks is what we say when we want to be grateful for someone's actions on our behalf. At times it's difficult to distinguish the two. Psalm 146 is praise in that it tells us about what God is like and how he acts.

Verses 3-4. Verse 3 says: Don't trust in princes, or leaders, or people of power, or politicians, people who hold power on earth. Why not? God is not in their hearts. They don't mean to do all for the praise of God. Why not? Because they are all mortals. Their thinking dies with them.

What they promise to deliver on is not guaranteed. Time is not theirs to control. They can't be trusted as God can be trusted. Why not? They can't deliver (or help, or save, or rescue). Why not? They use their positions or power for personal gain. Any leader who desires power is susceptible to abuse it.

I heard just a couple of days ago, that the popularity of our president is the lowest it's been. Why? Because the economy is not changing as he promised in his Make America Great campaign speeches. He promised. But the polls are saying he hasn't delivered. This happens to every president, doesn't it? Trusting in leaders is iffy at best. And compared to God, who never dies, who is always true, who is powerful without abusing his power, leaders should not be trusted for ultimate deliverance.

If you are a leader in whatever position you find yourself in, perhaps you manage a department in your company, or lead in a public position, maybe you are a teacher, or a parent, remind yourself often that you are limited. Even when people expect much of you. Remember that one day you die and your thoughts and plans will be replaced by another's. Remember that in using your power you can imitate God in loving, in generosity, in goodness not for your own sake but for the sake of others. But the praise you directed to God will last forever.

Verses 5-9. If we are not meant to trust our leaders who may we trust? The Psalmist says God can be trusted. The God of Jacob. The God Jacob (the grabber) trusted finally. Finally, God names him Israel: He struggled with God. He prevailed against his lack of trust. Trust didn't come easy for Jacob. But God dogged his steps until he learned to trust him. Jacob had some wrong narratives (stories he told himself that weren't true) about God for many years. For Jacob God was a God who only helps those who help themselves. Some people think this is in the Bible: God helps those who help themselves. Well it's not. Ben Franklin, a deist said it. Jacob, for much of his life takes the bull by the horn and manipulates his brother and father, and father-in-law and everyone he could manipulate to grab what he felt was his. You can read all about it in Genesis 25-27. His mother believed that God only helps those who help themselves. He passed it on to Jacob. He trusted in his mother. She and he were wrong. He thought If I let my father bless my brother Esau, the oldest of the family, there will be less for me. If I give it away I won't have enough. Another way Jacob thought that was wrong: my mother told me the inheritance is mine and that I should use it as I please. People who only trust in themselves are that way.

This Psalmist knows the story of Jacob. And wants us to know the God of Jacob. God is trusted because he made heaven and earth, the seas (the waters of chaos he gathered together and gave them their boundaries). The sea is a dangerous place in Hebrew thinking. But God tamed the sea. He has been faithful (he keeps faith). The poor can depend on him. Those who are mistreated, like Joseph, trusted him. The Daniels, the Shadrachs, Mishaks and Abednegos who were imprisoned wrongfully trusted him. In the wilderness, they were hungry. He gave them Manna from heaven. He sends the sun and the rain and the apple seed on the just and the unjust. He took a David who Saul wrongly accused and vindicated him. He took a Naaman who

was full of leprosy and made him clean, the widow of Zarephat and gave her the son she lost back. The blind see, the lame walk and the gospel is preached unto them.

Does that remind you of someone else? During Jesus' ministry, he did all these things and more. Not only did he do all those deeds that his Father did, like Father like Son, but he also died and rose again in the ultimate act of help, the help we needed the most from God. The help that makes us clean, restored, and at peace with God as individuals and as a church and as a world. The help that washed away our sin. "My sin, O the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin, your sin, the sin of the world who doesn't put their trust in God, our sin not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross and we bear it not more, praise the Lord O my soul."

And he commissioned us to do it in his name. And when we do it's as if we are doing it to him. Find a hungry man and feed him. You feed Jesus. Find an innocent prisoner and set him free. You're setting Jesus free. Find a resident alien, the one rejected by many, and you would be doing it for Jesus' sake. God helps all not just those who can help themselves. Don't worry you can share and you won't run out. Don't worry, what's yours is a gift of God to be used for his good pleasure not just yours. We can't do this kind of life on our own. But Jesus did it for us and wants to do it with us. Trust him. A disciple is not above his teacher but when the disciple is matured he will be like his teacher.

Verse 10. Praise is forever. It will last for eternity. Why? Because God is for eternity. His greatness he shares with no other. He is who he is forever. Praise will always be what we do as God's creatures. In eternity present and in eternity future. I have a feeling that our praise will expand eternally as we come to know God more and more. That's something to look forward to. No one else can make such a claim.

One last thing about praise. In Psalm 119:164 the Psalmist mentions in passing that praise is the way he organizes his day. He says 7 times a day I praise you for the way you teach me how to live according to your commands. That is a practice we can follow... we can imitate this song writer. Jesus himself practiced stopping several times each day to praise God, to pray, to bless the Lord. Do you remember in the Gospels where hours and times are mentioned: and it was the 3rd or 6th or 9th hour of the day, or at dawn... This isn't telling only what time on the clock it was. It is also telling us the times of the day when the Jews stopped to praise God, to bless, to remember their relationship with God, to declare their devotion to God and to ask for God's help. We know from historical writings that faithful Jews recited the Shema three times a day: Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One... We also know that in the afternoon they said a prayer called the Amidah, which is saying the 18 blessings of God while standing. Praise always. It's like rejoice always and again I say rejoice.

We could learn from that practice. We stop. We praise God. We return to our work refreshed. We are gentler than we were before praise. Perhaps less worried. More assured of God's presence. **Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise him all creatures here below. Praise him above ye heavenly hosts. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.**