

Psalms: Celebrate God's Love and Faithfulness Sunday, 8/15/21

Last week, we confronted those uncomfortable “cursing” psalms that we all tend to skip over. We learned that rather than seek out revenge, we can cry out to God when we see evil and injustice in this world, asking that God’s righteousness be made plain and that doers of injustice be stopped. This week, we’ll bask in the lovingkindness of God that’s affirmed in the praise psalms. Is there a way to make these old psalms more contemporary, moving past the time of the Exodus and into our modern lives?

File this one under, “And you think it’s hard for you to get to church?” This is a map of the ancient road between Jericho and Jerusalem. In the time of Jesus, it was a major route for traders as well as Jewish pilgrims who regularly traveled to the Temple for three annual Jewish festivals. It was almost twenty miles through desert terrain, uphill with over half a mile of elevation increase.¹ It was a dangerous road, with robbers, wild animals, and desert heat to contend with. This the context for our first psalm, 121, one of the so-called songs of ascent. You can see where those psalms get their name—from the ascent of the mountain road to Jerusalem, the location of the Jewish Temple. By the way, this would have been the same road referred to in the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the traveler was waylaid by thieves and ignored by passersby. Pilgrims would have had plenty of time to prepare their hearts for worship, and singing Psalms as they travelled was one way they did that.

Many people think that the very first line of Psalm 121 is actually a reference to the mountain that pilgrims ascended on this road, catching their first glimpse of the city walls and the temple on the horizon as they climbed. “I look up to the mountains—does my help come from there? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth!”²

There aren’t really any proper mountains in Minnesota. If we wanted to write a similar psalm for preparing our hearts on the journey to church, what might that look like? For those worshipping online, it might be, “I look into my wi-fi network- does my help come from there?” Some of you live so close to the church building that you’d barely have enough time to recite a psalm if you drove here. For me, I have a beautiful drive through rich farmland and lakes along Beebe Lake Road. I get great views of Steele Lake, Schmidt Lake, and

¹ <http://faith.nd.edu/s/1210/faith/interior.aspx?sid=1210&gid=609&pgid=33100>

² Psalm 121:1. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

Green Mountain Lake each time I take the twenty-minute drive. I enjoy seeing swans, pelicans, cranes, and kingfishers along the way. I might sing, “I look at all the beauty of God’s natural world- does my help come from there? No, my help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth!” It’s no wonder that so often the Praise Psalms make reference to the wonders of God’s creation.

I found an interesting historical note on verse 6, “The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon at night.”³ Apparently, ancient people used to believe that too much exposure to moonlight could be just as harmful as too much exposure to sunlight. That belief was persistent and is reflected in some of the words and expressions we still use today, like “lunatic” and “moonstruck.”⁴ Life-changing insight or fun fact? You decide!

This is a small portion of what’s often called “salvation history.” In terms of our Bible, this portion covers roughly Genesis through Judges. In the main body of our next Praise Psalm, there’s a very deliberate sampling of six verses from the time of creation, six from the Exodus from Egypt, and one from the time of wandering in the wilderness. We’re skipping over the six from the conquest of the Promised Land today, because that’s a can of worms we’ll need to discuss at another time. The praises of Psalm 136 constitute a recitation of God’s unfailing love throughout salvation history.

The Psalm was most likely used with a song leader and a congregation reading alternating lines. The song leader instructs the congregation to give thanks to God for a particular reason, taken from the timeline of God’s saving acts, and the congregation responds with the affirmation, “His love endures forever.” We’re going to read the psalm together in that way. As we do, I want you to make a connection in your mind between what I say, and your response. Every event from our salvation history is an affirmation of the faithful love of God. We’re reading together from Psalm 136, in the New Living Translation. Your response will always be the same, and it will remain on the screen in white letters. I’ll cue you for the first couple of responses until you get the hang of it.

{Read Psalm 136:1-16, 23-26 NLT}

Did you hear the references to all those events from Israel’s salvation history? Here’s

³ Psalm 121:6. Ibid.

⁴ Walton, Matthews, & Chavalas. The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament (p. 555).

the thing. We know that by faith, we're all descendants of Abraham, and so when the psalmist praises God for parting the Red Sea and delivering the descendants of Israel from the pursuing Egyptian chariots, we supposed to put ourselves right there with them, as if that was a part of our family history. But that's hard to do, isn't it? Those are all far away events, historically and culturally. So let's see if we can contextualize this is psalm in terms of more recent events.

Here's a summary of several thousand years of more recent history, and an infinite amount of time in the future. If this was a map, the green dot would indicate "you are here." In terms of the grand sweep of salvation history, we're living in the in-between time, the time of the Church, somewhere between the memory of the events in the New Testament and the realization of the promised future, the restoration of creation and eternal life. If you were going to write a song of praise to God, where would you look on this timeline for material?

Not many of us living in 2021 are going to go back to the time of the Kings, the Divided Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, or the exiles in Assyria and Babylon for expressing our gratitude to God. No, the most natural place for us to get our praise material, aside from Creation, is in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. I want you to be listening this year to the praise hymns and praise songs we sing in church. There will be plenty of lyrical references to salvation history, but they'll mostly be centered in Jesus and the events that followed his resurrection, with a large dose of Creation thrown in. Our praise hymns and praise songs are our modern-day psalms, reminding us of exactly why we can say with confidence, "His love endures forever!"

A great example of that from our hymnal is *To God Be the Glory*. Why give the glory to God? Because of the great things God has done. Which great things? All the great things that followed from his giving of Jesus to us, his own son. The hymn goes on to recite those things in detail: His atonement for our sin, the forgiveness he freely gives, his teaching, and our future of eternal life. Do you see how that hymn brackets the grand sweep of modern salvation history? It even has a small reference to God's creation thrown in for God measure, because for some reason, we can't help but acknowledge God's role in creation, no matter where we stand within salvation history.

An example from contemporary praise songs is Chris Tomlin's *Is He Worthy?* Listen to these lyrics. "Do you feel the world is broken? We do." There's a reference to the Fall. "Do you wish that you could see it all made new? We do." There's a reference to the New Creation, all the way to the other side of the timeline. But the centerpiece of the song is Jesus, of whom we sing, "The Lion of Judah who conquered the grave. He is David's root and the Lamb who died to ransom the slave. From ev'ry people and tribe. Ev'ry nation and tongue. He has made us a kingdom and priests to God to reign with the Son. Is He worthy? He is!"

When we sing in church, it's not just to break up the monotony of the pastor's preaching. We sing for the same reason, whether it's a hymn or a contemporary song. We sing to remind ourselves of all that God is and all that God has done. We sing so that we can affirm with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, "His love endures forever!"

If you made a list of all that God has done for you, your family, your community, or your church, what would you include? What are the moments in the history of your walk with God that make you want to cry out, "His love endures forever!" Was it the birth of a child or grandchild? The remission of a cancer? God's provision of daily bread at a time of great need? Reconciliation with someone you were separated from? The assurance from the Holy Spirit that your sins have been forgiven? The unshakeable faith of a friend who faced the end of their life with confidence in their future with God?

We are a forgetful people. We tend to take for granted the many ways God has shown us loving kindness in the last week, never mind the last ten years or even the grand sweep of salvation history. It's good for us to remember God's faithful acts of love. It's good for us to share those moments with others. And it's especially good to seize every opportunity we can to affirm God's goodness. His love endures forever! It's not just a slogan, it's borne out day after day, if only we'll have the eyes to see and the discipline to remember.

Please take some time now to reflect on your experience of God's enduring love.



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