

Praise to the King ***Psalm 145***

When you think of God, what's the first verb that comes to mind? You know verbs – they're those doing words. Not the first verb in terms of what God does, but the first verb in relation to yourself:

- Maybe it's something to do with grumbling and complaining – you're in a tough time right at the moment and you think God shouldn't have let that happen to you.
- Maybe it's something to do with asking and praying – you've got some big decisions coming up or you're facing some difficult tasks and you want some help.
- Maybe it's something to do with hiding and trying to escape His gaze – you've done something you know He hates but you'd rather hang onto whatever wrong you've done more than get right with Him.
- Maybe it's something to do with submitting and wanting to do what's right – you've been struggling with some area of your life God wants to change and you've got to the point of agreeing with God.
- Maybe it's something to do with praising – but you only thought of that because it's Sunday and that's what Sundays are for.

For David in Psalm 145, it's exalt, praise, extol.

The Structure

It's not easy to outline this psalm – to work out its basic structure. Some things are clear. First, it's an acrostic psalm – although that's not at all clear in our English Bibles. But, in the Hebrew, each couplet of lines begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet in order.

It's like beginning the first verse with the letter A; the second verse with B; the third verse with C; and so on.

Secondly, it's a psalm of praise. It's called that in the title line: *A psalm of praise. Of David.* I'm told it's the only psalm with that in its title – I haven't gone through and checked it up. The next five psalms are also psalms of praise – but they don't have title lines. They each begin with *hallelujah* – the NIV has translated it as *Praise the Lord* (and rightly so – since the ordinary Christian probably doesn't know that's what *hallelujah* means).

It's also pretty easy to pick up it's a psalm of praise from the opening and closing lines. Verse 1:

I will exalt You, my God the King;

I will praise Your name for ever and ever.

Every day I will praise You

And extol Your name for ever and ever.

And verse 21:

My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD.

Let every creature praise His holy name for ever and ever.

In between those opening and closing verses, we find a mixture of:

- praise of God;
- the reasons why we should praise God; and
- exhortations to praise God.

They don't fall apart into distinct sections – they're all mixed in together. And so, when you look at the various commentaries, you find all sorts of different possible outlines to this psalm.

From the outline in your service sheets, you'll notice I'm

dealing with it under four headings. Those headings come from four verses in this psalm:

- Verse 3: *Great is the LORD*
- Verse 8: *The LORD is gracious and compassionate*
- Verse 13b: *The LORD is faithful*
- Verse 17: *The LORD is righteous*

In some ways, each of those statements introduces a theme for the following verses – but the following verses don't always confine themselves to that one theme. The themes overlap. And so the second section, for example, isn't all about God's grace and compassion – verse 11 speaks of His might and verse 12 of His mighty acts which goes back to the first paragraph and the theme of God's greatness.

I think there's something instructive here. We base much of our western thinking on structured analysis. We like to classify things – put things into nice neat categories and have all the categories nicely arranged in relation to each other. In doing this, we often make divisions for the sake of analysis. So people analyse the human body by dividing it up into all its individual bits and pieces. That's often helpful for our finite minds. We're able to grasp the individual bits much more easily than the complex whole. But we must never forget the whole. I don't want some liver specialist operating on my liver if he has no idea what impact his actions will have on my heart.

When it comes to God, we can benefit from concentrating on His various attributes: His greatness, His compassion, His faithfulness, His righteousness and so on. There is value in thinking about each of those separately. But, we must never forget that He remains one God – and that He's all of these things at once and that He's at perfect

harmony within Himself always.

Some people trip themselves up at this point. The classic is those who think we have two different Gods in the Bible:

- the angry, wrathful God of the Old Testament; and
- the loving, forgiving God of the New Testament.

They think those two ideas are incompatible. They say God can't be both – He can only be one or the other. So they make a choice. The concept of an angry God's just too dangerous – so they toss Him aside and keep the loving God. There are several problems with what they do. One is they don't read their Bibles very carefully. God is loving and forgiving in the Old Testament as well as the New; and God is just as wrathful and angry in the New Testament as He is in the Old. But also, they do their individual analysis in such a way that they forget the whole. There is only one God. He is perfect in all His attributes and He is perfectly consistent within Himself. He's not internally divided. He's not at war within Himself. If we think there's a conflict between the various attributes of God, then the problem's with our thinking and how we've defined those attributes – not with God.

And when we realise that, it's no wonder there's this overlap between the attributes in this psalm.

- God's great acts are expressed with graciousness and compassion. It's not a matter of God displaying raw power for the sake of it – but rather using His great power for the benefit of His creation.
- God is faithful to His promises because of His greatness. He's so great that nothing can thwart Him when He works to carry out His purposes.

And so it's not surprising the psalmist moves freely from

one to the other in his praise of God.

A third thing that's clear: it's a psalm of praise to God as King. That's stated in the opening line. There's also a lot of kingdom language concentrated in verses 11 to 13. And some of the other verses are best understood in terms of a king wisely and lovingly ruling over his subjects.

God's Greatness

David begins by celebrating God's greatness. Verse 3:

*Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;
His greatness no one can fathom.*

What's the greatest thing you can imagine? Hollywood competes to come up with new blockbusters each year to stretch our minds with regard to greatness – but its sci-fi offerings don't even match the daily realities we take for granted.

- In terms of size, the night sky stretches above us beyond what we can see – countless galaxies and stars, unimaginable distances.
- In terms of power – yes, we've seen the destructive force of nuclear weapons. But we also benefit from the positive force of the sun's radiation – and have done for centuries – and it's just one star among many.

My mind stretches to comprehend those things. Sure, I can grasp the concepts and rattle off the figures with all those zeros on the end – but do I really realise the greatness involved in it? And yet that greatness is puny when compared with the greatness of the One who created it all. Whatever I can imagine, it falls short of how great God is.

But that doesn't mean I should give up – simply say it's

all beyond me so I won't bother about it. It's not that at all. Quite the opposite. Verse 4:

*One generation will commend Your works to another;
they will tell of Your mighty acts.
They will speak of the glorious splendour of Your
majesty,
and I will meditate on Your wonderful works.
They will tell of the power of Your awesome works,
and I will proclaim Your great deeds.
They will celebrate Your abundant goodness
and joyfully sing of Your righteousness.*

While I have no hope of ever completely fathoming the unfathomable, it doesn't mean I have no understanding. Even we finite, puny humans can grasp something of God's greatness – and we do it by looking at what He's done and by sharing that with one another.

What's God done – what are these mighty works David speaks of? Theologians – who like to systematise and divide things up into nice neat packages – speak of three big areas:

- God's works of creation – what God did in bringing everything into being.
- God's works of providence – that God didn't just set up the world to run all by itself but that He sustains it and maintains it day by day.
- God's works of redemption – that God acted in Israel's history to rescue her from slavery in Egypt and give her the land of Canaan. For us, those works of redemption culminated in Jesus' death on the cross to rescue us from slavery to sin.

As we meditate on these things:

- As we think about the intricacies of the various aspects of creation and how it all hangs together and the amazing structure of living cells ...
- As we think about how God keeps the world going despite the disastrous and horrendous things we humans have done to it ...
- As we think about the Word leaving the splendour of heaven and becoming flesh and slumming it with us humans so He could rescue us ...

So we will grow in our understanding of God's greatness – and so we will stand in marvel and awe and admiration and praise of God.

It's something we need to take to heart. We've grown up in the great scientific era. Science explains many things. For many people, the more science explains, the smaller God is for them. Their awe diminishes. Their wonder fades. It's a wrong reaction. Just because science has unravelled human DNA doesn't mean its Creator is any less great – nor that the One who gave scientists brains to work it out is in any sense diminished. The discoveries of science should increase our awe – as we comprehend more of the marvellous way God's put His world together and keeps it going. Think about these things. Tell them to one another. Pass them to the next generation. Celebrate them in the way you think and the way you live.

God's Compassion

Secondly, God is compassionate. Verse 8:

*The LORD is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and rich in love.
The LORD is good to all;
He has compassion on all He has made.
All You have made will praise You, O LORD;*

Your saints will extol You.

God doesn't use His power oppressively. Some rulers let power go to their heads. They use it to satisfy their own self-centred desires. They become tyrants and despots, making life miserable for those suffering under their rule. History records the atrocities committed by such leaders.

God's not like that. He exercises His power for the benefit of His creation. He cares for the subjects in His realm – all of them. James tells us:

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. (James 1:17)

And Jesus reminds us:

Your Father causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:45)

That's what theologians call God's general or common grace. It's given to all humanity – to those who've given up their rebellion against God and those who continue in it. We all still live in God's good world – and benefit from the goodness of His creation.

Sure, it's a world groaning under God's judgment. Our rebellion in the Garden of Eden wasn't left unpunished. All sorts of things remind us we messed things up with God – weeds in our gardens; droughts in our land; broken relationships; murders on the news; our anger at others. Yet, God has held back – He's slow to anger – He hasn't yet unleashed the fully deserved judgment. He treats us better than we deserve – giving us the opportunity to give up the rebellion and be forgiven.

And, for those of us who've taken that opportunity, we understand more fully the depths of God's grace and His compassion. David knew something of this:

- He knew it historically in that God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt – not because of anything good in Israel, but because of God's own grace.
- He knew it personally in that God forgave his sin of adultery and murder – not because of anything good in David, but because of God's own compassion.

We know it more fully in Jesus. Our sin deserves God's full judgment – to be cast forever out of God's presence and into the torments of hell. Jesus took that judgment in our place. That's the extent of God's compassion – that He Himself bore our punishment so He could forgive us and welcome us into His family. Is there any compassion or grace that is greater than this? Is it not cause for breaking out into praise of our great and gracious God?

God's Faithfulness

Thirdly, God is faithful. Verse 13b:

*The LORD is faithful to all His promises
and loving toward all He has made.*

*The LORD upholds all those who fall
and lifts up all who are bowed down.*

*They eyes of all look to You,
and You give them their food at the proper time.*

*You open Your hand
and satisfy the desires of every living thing.*

You and I aren't always faithful with our promises. Even those with reputations for reliability – people known for keeping their word – sometimes fail.

- Circumstances change.
- Other things intervene.

- There are extra demands on their time.
- Other people don't come through for them.
- They forget.

God doesn't have those problems. He knows the future with precision. Nothing takes Him by surprise. He has the ability to do anything. He doesn't forget. When He promises something, you can rely on it.

But sometimes we doubt. Sometimes circumstances enter our lives and we think God's wrong to let that happen to us. We think it shows God doesn't care. We think God's distracted by other things and He's forgotten us. This morning, I'm conscious that many of you face some pretty difficult circumstances right now – all sorts of different things. In these trying circumstances, you may be tempted to doubt God's faithfulness.

Sometimes that temptation comes because we misunderstand what God's promised. We think God's promised things He hasn't.

- God hasn't promised that bad things won't happen to us – that we're somehow exempt from suffering in this world.
- God hasn't promised we won't feel hurt and pain and sorrow – nor has He said it's wrong to feel the pain and the sorrow. These things do hurt. We're not supposed to deny that or pretend otherwise.

Rather, what God has promised is that these bad things can't separate us from His love – they can't rob us of the salvation He's given us in Jesus. And more than that, God has promised that He uses even these bad things to achieve His good purposes in our lives. His good purposes have to do with rescuing us from sin and developing godly character within us – and He thinks

that's far more important than money or happiness or a new iPod. And He will bring it about. The work He's begun in us, He will bring to completion.

God's Righteousness

Fourthly, God is righteous. Verse 17:

*The LORD is righteous in all His ways
and loving toward all He has made.*

*The LORD is near to all who call on Him,
to all who call on Him in truth.*

*He fulfils the desires of those who fear Him;
He hears their cry and saves them.*

*The LORD watches over all who love Him,
but all the wicked He will destroy.*

God determines what's right and wrong. There's no outside arbiter – no outside standard. God sets the standard – and it's a standard consistent with His holy and good and righteous and loving character. And He always acts consistently with that character – in all His ways.

Thus, humanity is divided into two groups:

- those who agree with God and God's purposes and God's desires and want to pursue God's goodness; and
- those who don't – those who disagree with God or think they know better than God or they want to ignore God.

The first group lives in proper relationship with God.

- They call on Him in truth – that is, they know the truth of what God's revealed about Himself and His world and they rely on that. They trust it. They ask God to act consistently with it. They ask God to

help them on the basis of what He's said.

- And they fear God – that is, they respect Him and have proper reverence for Him. They recognise He's the Creator and they're the creatures. They recognise that He's wise beyond their understanding and so they trust His word. They recognise His purposes are pure and best and so they conform their desires to what He wants.

And God hears them and saves them and watches over them. And that's a great reason to praise God – to praise the King who rules over them so compassionately.

The second group don't live in proper relationship with God. They may still do what we think of as good things from time to time – maybe even often. But they don't do them from the position of submission to God. They don't do them because they respect God. They don't do them out of a desire to please God. They don't live like a creature – and that's wicked, no matter how much good comes from it. In the end, they'll be overthrown. The fact of their lack of right relationship with God will be made completely plain. For, in the long run, that's the only thing that counts – whether we, as creatures, live in right relationship with our Creator.

Praise the King

Now, we've worked our way through the psalm – sort of. I haven't covered every little detail, but I think I've covered the main bits. Yet, I'm still concerned we need to think a bit more about the whole. We've considered fairly briefly four of God's attributes. There's nothing wrong with that – except it's been far too brief.

Yet, the danger is we've missed the thrust of the psalm –

that I've been too analytical and lost something in the process. For in analysing these attributes, to some extent I've dealt with issues people have with them.

- People look at the suffering in the world and question whether God is loving and compassionate.
- Christians look at suffering in their lives and question whether God is faithful to them.

Now those issues aren't actually in the psalm – but they may be issues in your mind as you read the psalm. That's why I've touched on them – even if it's only briefly.

But the danger is that's detracted from the overall point – which is full on praise of our great God. David has no doubts about these four attributes of God.

- God is great.
- God is gracious and compassionate.
- God is faithful.
- God is righteous.

And he didn't always have it easy. He struggled in his life. We're going to look at the second half of 1 Samuel in first term and we'll see the depths of some of those struggles. Saul tried to kill him and drove him from the land of God's promise. David doesn't write this from some ivory tower, not having experienced the sufferings of humanity. He'd had more than his fair share of problems. And yet, he writes:

I will exalt You, my God the King;

I will praise Your name for ever and ever.

Every day I will praise You

And extol Your name for ever and ever.

Because God is King – and He rules with goodness and mercy and for the benefit of His people. He deserves to be praised.

And so David encourages others to also praise::

My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD.

Let every creature praise His holy name for ever and ever.

And this is God's word. So, it's not simply David telling us this – this is God's direction to us. We're to meditate on His splendour and majesty and burst forth in praise in response. We're to ponder His great deeds and proclaim them to others.