

July 28/29, 2007

Psalms - Volume XI

Praise the Name of the Lord

Psalm 135

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I think at the end of the summer we'll have gone through about 110 of the psalms, so we're making quite a bit of progress. Even though the Psalms collectively are part of the poetic literature of Scripture, we also understand there are a lot of different types of psalms. Some are meant for instruction; some are psalms of lament; and some of the psalms really are a call to worship—they're meant to be a guide as we worship together. So we thought it would be interesting this morning to use one of the psalms to do that. Really consistent with the purpose of the psalm is just to allow it to guide us through our worship this morning.

So that's what we're going to be doing. We're going to be interacting with Psalm 135. We're going to take it in four different divisions, which are pretty consistent with the way the psalm is written, and then respond in worship out of those different sections of the psalm.

If you have a Bible this morning, I invite you to turn with us to Psalm 135. One of the unique things about Psalm 135 is that the majority of the verses are actually quotations from other parts of the Old Testament. It's really a collection of various texts of the Old Testament put together to form a theme and a guideline for worship.

Verse 1:

**Praise the LORD [which is the Hebrew "Hallelujah"]! Praise the name of the LORD;
Praise Him, O servants of the LORD, (*NASB)**

We remind ourselves again when it says "Praise the name of the LORD," the name is the essence or the substance of all that God is. And of course we remind ourselves again that when it's all said and done, the real heartbeat of worship is not the music style—it's not what instruments are used—it's really the object of our worship. What God wants from His people are hearts that are focused on Him, hearts that are worshipping Him. At the end of the day that's what matters to God. It's about the substance or the content of our worship.

"Praise Him, O servants of the LORD." We talked about this a couple of weeks ago. What does a servant do? A servant serves, and the ultimate act of service is our service of worship. What God wants from us more than anything else is our worship. God doesn't need us to go out and do a whole lot of things for Him as much as He wants our heart. He wants our worship. That's the essence of our salvation.

We've reminded ourselves that we're very passionate about evangelism and reaching lost people, and we would consider that to be very, very important. But we also remind ourselves that evangelism is but for a season; worship is that which we will do forever. We are rehearsing the thing that we will do in God's presence forever, so it is the ultimate act of service for the believer.

Verse 2:

You who stand in the house of the LORD, in the courts of the house of our God!

This is probably referring to the priests, those people that worked in the temple. If you notice the psalms that precede 135, in the little writing, the superscription, it says “Psalms of Ascent.” Those identify those psalms that the nation would chant or sing together as they would ascend the holy mountain on certain festival days of the year.

Imagine hundreds of thousands of people together chanting and singing these psalms one after another as they would ascend the hill in order to enter into the presence of God that was represented by the temple. They’d do this three or four times a year. So probably when they arrived there, these psalms like 135 and those that follow would have been guidelines to worship as they surrounded, in essence, the presence of God.

So talking about the priests and those who dwell in the temple as part of their calling, it’s a call for them to come and worship. We would understand today, in the new covenant, this would be a call for all of us that we stand in the presence of God. It’s a remarkable thing, when you stop and think about it, that we this morning have been called to stand in the presence of God. Hebrews says, “Come boldly”—not recklessly, not carelessly—but boldly into the presence of God.

Sometimes I think we fail to realize that out of the billions of people on earth, those who are allowed to stand in the presence of God are those only who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus. It is a rare privilege. It is a rare privilege very few who ever draw breath will ever know. Yet that is what we do as the people of God: we come and we stand in the presence of Jesus, having been made righteous by the salvation that God has offered.

Starting in verse 3, then, we get some of the reasons why we praise the Lord:

Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; sing praises to His name, for it is lovely.

We’ve talked about this several times this summer, about the goodness of God. It’s important to remind ourselves that in the ancient world there were thousands of gods, but none of these gods were considered to be good. If you were to ask the pagan religious people whether or not their god was good, they would have said “no”—the god of Baal, the god of Molech, whatever one of those gods you wanted to identify. People were driven by fear. They were driven by a god of anger, a god of terror. They would do the strangest, most desperate things to try to appease the wrath of their god so their god would not destroy them. But the one thing they would never say is that their god was good.

That’s what distinguished the God of the Hebrew people—that He is good; He is kind; He is gentle; He is merciful; He is filled with grace. That’s one of the things that made Him so unique.

“Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; sing praises to His name, for it is lovely.” This word “sing” we’ve seen before this summer. It’s a word that literally means to stretch out or reach with your fingers. It’s really a reference to playing an instrument, and the primary emphasis would be on instrumental music. Now it can include lyrics, but it’s not limited to that.

It reminds us again that we sometimes have a very narrow view of worship. If we don’t have lyrics with the instruments, somehow we think that doesn’t count. We have to be really careful with that. When the Hebrew people would finally surround the temple, it was an all-out party. They would play instruments; they would play tambourines; they would dance. They would have a party in the presence of God because God is good and He is worthy of their worship.

We have to remind ourselves it's okay to be happy in the presence of God. It's okay to have a party in the presence of God and to just celebrate. That's pleasing to God and that's what that word reminds us of.

“Sing praises to His name, for it is lovely.” The word “lovely” means it's delightful; it's pleasurable. Again, the pagans would have never described Molech or Baal or any of these other gods with those kinds of terms. Their gods were not lovely; they were not delightful; they were not pleasant. Their religion was driven by a sense of terror and fear, which is frankly true of all world religions today other than Christianity. What ultimately drives the passion is fear. It's this fear that the wrath of their god is going to come down on them if they don't do what they're supposed to be doing.

Maybe you've had a spouse, maybe a parent, maybe a coworker, maybe a boss that one day seemed to be lovely and delightful, and the next day seemed to just come unhinged. Day in and day out you never know quite what you're going to get.

Do you ever imagine what it would be like if God was that way: if on any given day you come into the presence of God and God just comes uncorked on you? The idea of Him being lovely is the idea that God is never like that. God's goodness is not just what He does, it's who He is—and God is delightful; He's pleasurable; He's lovely. God is always the same and He loves to have us, as His people, come into His presence and worship Him. It's delightful to Him.

Verse 4:

For the LORD has chosen Jacob for Himself, Israel for His own possession.

We move, in verse 4, into this mysterious and wonderful doctrine called the doctrine of election: the reminder that God has chosen His people. From Genesis to Revelation there is this mysterious doctrine that God has a chosen people whom He has called to know Him as Savior.

There's much about that we don't understand. We don't understand how it fits together with free will, and there is definitely a mystery to all of that. Ephesians 1 in the New Testament says that you were chosen before the foundation of the world, meaning before the earth was even thrown down, God had chosen you to be one of His children.

Even though we don't fully understand it, it doesn't mean it isn't so. Many people dismiss the doctrine of election because they can't make sense of it, but that's really not a good reason to dismiss it. There's a lot about God we don't fully understand or comprehend.

The idea of choosing Jacob of course is a reminder of Jacob the individual, but also a reference to the Hebrew people. When we think about Jacob, we're reminded that Jacob wasn't chosen because he was so good or because he was so faithful. As a matter of fact, it was just the opposite. Jacob was a schemer; Jacob was a deceiver; Jacob was a liar. He was a bit of a scoundrel, and when we read through the text in Genesis we find ourselves wondering, *God, why would You choose Jacob?* And the answer is, “Because I did.”

That's Paul's answer in the book of Romans when he's talking about why God chose Jacob and didn't choose Esau. The answer to that is, “Because I did. I chose Jacob before either of them was born. It had nothing to do with them. It had nothing to do with any good that they had done. It simply was My choice, and I can do that because I'm God.” That's the essence of the argument.

Now I don't understand how all this works. I only know this: that if you have trusted Jesus as your Savior, ultimately it's a response to the fact that in eternity past, God chose you. Why He chose you and why He chose me, I don't know. All I know is I'm surrounded by hundreds of thousands of people that today are living lives of despair and emptiness. The difference between them and me is that God chose me—not because of any good I had done or because I'm a cut above or for any other reason than He just did.

We need to understand that as we enter into the presence of God. What separates us from those living lives of despair is simply the grace of God, and for whatever reason He chose you and He called you into His presence to experience His goodness.

As a matter of fact, verse 4 says He called Israel to be His own possession. The Hebrew is literally "His own special treasure." It's a remarkable thing that God has called you into His presence to be His own special possession, His own special treasure. Ephesians 2:10: God has called you to be His *poema*. You're His original piece of art, His masterpiece, in order that He might put the glory of His grace on display. So we enter into the presence of God and we celebrate His goodness—because God is lovely, because God is good, because God has called us to be His people and He has made us His own special treasure.

Do you understand this week that regardless of what has transpired this week, God loves you and God longs to have you come into His presence and worship Him? When you come into God's presence, God doesn't look at you and roll His eyes and think, *Oh, here we go again—another lousy week*. God looks at you and says, "You're My treasure. You're My own original piece of art and I love you. And I love to have you stand before Me and worship Me."

So with that in mind, let's stand together and celebrate the goodness of God and remind ourselves that we came here broken and God has healed us by His grace.

[*singing*]

We celebrate the goodness of God, which is a reflection of His moral character, but we also celebrate the greatness of our God, which is a reflection of His power, which is where the psalmist goes next.

Verse 5:

For I know that the LORD is great and that our Lord is above all gods.

"For *I* know"—it's in the emphatic, which means that's the emphasis. The psalmist knows personally. We talked about the fact that we come here broken and God has made us whole. Part of that wholeness gives us eyes to see what the people around us don't see. We see the signature of God on everything and we're reminded of the greatness of our God—that our Lord, Adonai, our Master, is above all other gods.

Interestingly enough, even in the ancient world the ancients understood that the God of the Hebrews was a God above all other gods. You see that come up over and over again in the Old Testament. They clearly understood that the power of the Hebrew God was unlike any other god—that their God was *the* God.

Verse 6:

Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps.

It's the reality that God is sovereign. God is unlimited in His power, and whatever He pleases, He does. No one can stop Him; no one can thwart Him; no one can get in His way. Now the text is worded very carefully. It does not say God does what He pleases. That has a sense of kind of recklessness and selfishness. But what pleases Him is what He does. There is a sense in which God is limited by His own character, by the essence of who He is. That which pleases God, God does. There's no other god and there's no other force that can stop Him or slow Him down.

Verse 7:

He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth; who makes lightnings for the rain, who brings forth the wind from His treasures.

This is a very interesting verse. The psalmist begins to focus specifically on God and creation, which is a common theme for the power of God, for the greatness of God. (We'll talk about why that is in just a moment.) In this particular case, he's focusing on something very specific—and that is this process that goes from evaporation to condensation to precipitation that is this cycle that is a reflection of the power of God.

Now one of the things that's interesting is the ancient world had no knowledge of this. As a matter of fact, the psalmist says that the clouds ascend, not descend. They would have seen the clouds as coming from the sky, but the psalmist is saying, "No, actually it comes from the earth. There is an ascension of this vapor or this cloud."

Oftentimes we hear people give the impression that somehow science and the Bible are contradictory, but that just simply isn't true. We would say that science and the Bible are actually very good friends, and over and over again science verifies the inspiration of the Scripture.

In an ancient world where nobody understood the process, the psalmist gets it exactly right. Scientists read this verse and say that's exactly the way it happens, which again is a reminder of the touch of God, the inspiration of God in the writing of Scripture. He talks about the clouds or the vapors ascending from the ends of the earth.

Now I'm not a scientist, and some of you understand this far better than I do, but I did do a little bit of reading this week and it's really quite a remarkable concept. For example, did you know that if you took one square mile of an ocean or a sea, in a 12-hour time period there are seven tons of water that are evaporated. One square mile of ocean surface, over the period of 12 hours, seven tons of water is evaporated. Now imagine that times the entire surface of the waters of the earth!

Another interesting fact is that if you took one square mile of water that was six inches deep and tried to figure how much manufactured heat it would take in order to evaporate that much water, it would take 30,000 tons of coal just to evaporate one square mile six inches deep. And you think of what God does throughout the earth in an entire day! We are struck with the reality of God's unimaginable power in the most basic cycles of the earth.

The psalmist talks about “who makes lightnings for the rain.” Again that’s a very scientifically correct statement of the involvement with lightning to affect the rain—“lightning for the rain.”

“Who brings forth the wind from His treasures.” Now if you did not have all the scientific equipment that we have today and you’re just thinking about the wind, it’s really a very mysterious thing. It seems to come from nowhere; it seems to go nowhere. As a matter of fact, that’s exactly what Jesus said in John 3 when He was talking to Nicodemus—talking about the Holy Spirit being mysterious like the wind. It comes from nowhere; it goes nowhere; it’s just this mysterious force.

This is the imagery of this wind being housed in a warehouse, and God opens the door and lets it out for a while and puts it back away and closes the door. It’s a great imagery of the power of God. The psalmist is focusing here on the greatness of God, on the power of God, and reminding us again that the signature of God is on everything around us.

You see this as a very consistent theme throughout the Scripture and you have to ask yourself, *Why is that?* The very first thing we learn about God is that God is creative and God spoke the universe into place. Because God has lifted the blinders from our eyes as His people, we see things that the people around us do not see. In everything that we see, we see the hand of God; we see the signature of God; we see the power of God. Where our unbelieving neighbor may see a sunset in a tree, we see the hand of God.

I think the importance to us is God realized that life on this earth is going to be hard and there are going to be challenges to our faith. There are going to be ups and there are going to be downs. He wanted to make sure that we never lose sight of the greatness of His power, we never lose sight of the fact that God is adequate for our every need. So God said, “I’m going to put My signature on everything; and everywhere you look every day of your life, you’re going to see evidence of My power to remind you that My power is adequate.”

Whatever you’re struggling with, whatever you’re going through, whatever the challenges are in your life, the evidence of God’s power is everywhere. You cannot possibly go through a day without seeing it. There is a reminder that this God who spoke the universe into place, this God who is so great, this God who is so indescribable is the same God that is there for you to handle whatever it is you’re going through today. God wants to make sure you never lose sight of that, so He has put His signature on everything around you.

So with that in mind, let’s worship the greatness of our God, a God who is so indescribable yet He knows you and He loves you and He calls you by name.

[*singing*]

We celebrate the goodness of our God; we celebrate the greatness of our God; but we also celebrate that a God who is good and a God who is great intervenes in the lives of His people.

The psalmist in verse 8 says:

He smote the firstborn of Egypt, (v. 8a)

The pronoun there, third-person pronoun “He,” is literally in the Hebrew “the One who.” In my opinion it’s unfortunate they didn’t leave that wording in the text, because he’s wanting to make

sure we make the connection that the God who is good and the God who is great, the God who designed the universe is the One who intervenes in the lives of His people.

He smote the firstborn of Egypt, both of man and beast. He sent signs and wonders into your midst, O Egypt, upon Pharaoh and all his servants. (vv. 8-9)

If you're not familiar with this story from the book of Exodus, the Hebrew people were in captivity to the Egyptians. God raised up Moses to be a deliverer, to lead the Hebrew people out of the slavery of Egypt into the land of promise. So Moses was called to stand before the Pharaoh and say on behalf of God, "Let My people go." But of course, the Hebrew people were a large percentage of the workforce for Egypt, so Pharaoh was not interested in that. So God sent a series of plagues, ten in all, in order to convince Pharaoh to let His people go.

Now these are the signs and wonders that are referred to in these verses. In essence what the psalmist is saying is God is a God of grace and mercy. Pharaoh was doing everything imaginable to offend God. They had their pagan deity. Pharaoh was shaking his fist at God. God would have had every right to just wipe Pharaoh and the Egyptians out and deliver His people. But because God is a God of grace and mercy, over and over and over again God demonstrated the reality of His power and presence with these signs and wonders called these plagues.

It was God's way of saying, "Pharaoh, I am real and I am alive. Do not mess with Me. Day after day I am real and I am alive. Pharaoh, I am warning you, do not fight Me. You cannot fight Me and win." Over and over again God gave Pharaoh and the Egyptians fair warning not to fight Him.

But they simply would not listen, so the final plague, which is the one referred to here in verse 8, was that the oldest male of both the families and the animals would perish. On this night when they would perish, the Hebrew people were told to slay a lamb and take the blood of the lamb and paint it on the doorframe of your house. When God comes along—when He sees the blood of the lamb on the doorframe of the house, He will pass over—and rather than experiencing God's judgment they will experience God's salvation. There was the reminder in this of this foreshadowing picture of the coming of the Savior.

Verse 10:

He smote many nations and slew mighty kings, Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan, and all the kingdoms of Canaan; and He gave their land as a heritage, a heritage to Israel His people. (vv. 10-12)

If you want to see the details of these stories, they're in Numbers chapter 21. God is reminding us through the psalmist that when those people tried to stand in His way, when those people tried to attack His people, God acted on behalf of His people. God acted on behalf of the Hebrew people and He wiped out Sihon and his army because they attacked the Hebrew people. Og and his army attacked the Hebrew people, and God wiped them out and He gave Israel, He gave the Hebrew people that land as a heritage.

Verse 13:

Your name, O LORD, is everlasting, Your remembrance [it could be translated Your fame], O LORD, throughout all generations.

From time to time we sing a song about the Famous One. There's always a certain risk to that because people in our culture think of fame as being a celebrity. But if you think of fame the way the psalmist intends it, it's God's name is renown. God's name is known throughout the earth because of His greatness, because of His acts, because of His intervention in history.

We see many occasions in the Old Testament where even the pagan nations knew of the reputation of the Hebrew God. What is unique about the God of the Hebrews is that He is alive and He is real and He has intervened over and over and over again in human history on behalf of His people.

For the LORD will judge His people and will have compassion on His servants. (v. 14)

That word "judge" is kind of an unfortunate translation there. The word there means He will vindicate, He will take His stand for. The idea is that God is for His people and He will vindicate His people. He will stand with and for His people and He will pour out His compassion on them.

I think the idea of this section of the psalm is saying this God who is good, this God who is great is also a God who is for His people. They are His own special treasure and God is not going to sit passively by and watch while people attack His people. He is involved. He has intervened into history.

There is also a clear message that this God is not only a God of compassion and mercy but a God of judgment. There is a clear warning: Do not mess with this God. Don't fight this God. You cannot shake your fist at this God and win.

We live in a culture where people want to believe that all roads lead to heaven and that there are many different gods, and God is kind of just this happy Spirit in the sky and let's not talk about judgment and let's not talk about condemnation. But the Bible is very clear, and that's what this portion of the psalm is all about: that there is a God filled with love and compassion who wants people to experience His salvation. But for those who choose not to—those who choose to fight Him, those who choose to reject Him—there is condemnation, there is judgment. You cannot fight this God and win. At the end of the day, there is only one team that wins—and that's God's team.

Jesus affirmed the same thing in the New Testament. There are two roads. There is a road that leads to life and there is a road that leads to destruction. There is no in-between ground. There is a way of life and there is a way of destruction. There is a way of light and there is a way of darkness. There is a reminder that the God who is salvation and mercy and love is also a God of judgment.

We have one warning shot after another, just like Pharaoh and the Egyptians, where God over and over again says, "I am real. I am alive. I am powerful. I want you to know My salvation. Don't fight Me. Don't mess with Me. I want you to experience My love and compassion. But if you choose to fight Me, you will not win." That's the emphasis from Genesis to Revelation over and over and over again that we must understand.

The picture when the Hebrew people experienced the final plague and were set free from the bondage in Egypt was a picture of the fulfillment of the salvation to come—that the blood of the Lamb of God would be shed for the sins of the world, and when that blood is applied to the sin of our lives, that our sins are forgiven and rather than experiencing God's judgment, we experience God's salvation.

It was celebrated through the elements of Passover. God Himself said, “I want you once a year to reenact this drama. When you reenact it, I want you to remember what God has done for you. I want you to remember His salvation.” Of course, it was Jesus Himself in the upper room the night that He was to be arrested that took the elements of Passover and redefined them. He said, “This is now symbolic of the new covenant. This bread is symbolic of My body which will be broken for you and this wine is symbolic of My blood which will be shed for you.” Jesus was the fulfillment.

The ultimate intervention in history was when God Himself became flesh, walked on this earth and clearly declared the message of salvation. Then He Himself became the sacrifice for sin. He died on the cross for the sins of the world that those who are willing to believe Jesus did that for me and apply that blood to the doorframe of our hearts—to ask God to forgive our sins—rather than God’s wrath we experience God’s salvation, God’s compassion and mercy, and inherit paradise with Him forever.

I would have to think that in a group this large this morning, there are those of you that have never trusted Christ as Savior. Some of you may be up to your eyebrows in religion but you’ve never really experienced God’s salvation. Some of you may be confused and seeking. I don’t know why you’re here this morning. I only know that the Bible is very clear in telling you that God’s desire is to warn you over and over and over again there is a judgment coming. There is a condemnation for those who choose to reject God’s way of salvation. But if you’re willing by faith to receive what Jesus has done for you on the cross, God longs to save you. God longs to forgive your sin. God wants you to stand in His presence righteous and pure because of the blood of Jesus. God offers you that this morning as a gift if you’ll receive it.

I want to warn you with the psalmist: Don’t mess with this God. Don’t trifle with this God. He’s warning you. But if you choose not to listen to His warning, He is a God of judgment and you will suffer His wrath.

The idea of Passover then became the command to participate in Communion to, in essence, relive the drama of the broken body and the shed blood of Jesus. So that’s what we want to do this morning. If you’re visiting with us and you don’t understand what Communion is about, there’s no reason to be embarrassed by that. Just pass the tray right on by. If you have trusted Jesus as your Savior and you believe you’re right with Him, we certainly invite you to join us. As the servers pass the bread, just take one and hold on to it. Wait until everyone has been served and then we’ll partake together. But in the next moments I would invite you to listen to the words of this song (as Alan sings) that focus on the cross, and process before God the salvation that God has offered through the finished work on the cross.

[singing, communion observed]

One thing that was unique about the God of the Hebrews is that He was alive. He was real and intervened on behalf of His people over and over and over through history—of course, even to the extent that this God became flesh and became the Savior of the world.

That is contrasted with the idols of the pagan nations that the psalmist talks about, starting in verse 15:

The idols of the nations are but silver and gold, the work of man’s hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; they have eyes, but they do not see; they have ears,

but they do not hear, nor is there any breath at all in their mouths. Those who make them will be like them, yes, everyone who trusts in them. (vv. 15-18)

This sounds very much like Jeremiah 10 and Isaiah 44, where those prophets talk about the idols of the world. In Isaiah 44, Isaiah talks about the foolishness of the idols of these pagan religions. He says, “You go out into the woods and you cut down a tree. Then you bring the tree back, and part of the tree you use to make firewood and the other part of the tree you use to make a god and you worship it.” And he asks the question, “What sense does that make? How could that god have any power?”

We travel around the world and you see cultures in the world today who are still very much like that. They worship gods of concrete and gods of wood. You see them and you want to tell them they have eyes but they do not see, they have ears but they do not hear, they have mouths but they do not speak. They are not real! They have no power to deliver the goods in your hour of need.

Yet we today in our culture are just not that much different. We have our own idols. We make our own gods—our gods of money, gods of our houses and our cars and pleasure and success. We pursue these things and we worship these things. But these things have no more power to deliver the goods in our hour of need than does a piece of wood or a piece of concrete.

Try praying to your bank account in your hour of need when your child is lying on a hospital bed. Pray to your car; pray to your house; pray to your pleasure. You realize these things have no power. They are not gods! There is only one God, who is good and who is great and can deliver the goods in your hour of need.

What the psalmist says is very interesting: that as you pursue these gods, you become like them. Those who make them and those who pursue them become like them. I think he’s specifically referring to the fact that when we pursue these gods, pretty soon we have eyes but we do not see, we have ears but we do not hear, we have mouths but we do not speak. We no longer are alive. We just pursue these gods in an empty attempt to try to fill the despair in our lives.

We probably all know religious people who are pursuing their gods but they no longer have eyes to see, they no longer have ears to hear. They’re no longer willing to seek and pursue the truth. They’re just caught up in their religion and their lifeless empty despair.

We remind ourselves this morning that, apart from the grace of God, we would be just like them. Apart from the grace of God and God’s mysterious choosing, we could be lying in a street in India or we could be at home with a hangover this morning, trying to recover from last night’s attempt to fill the emptiness in our lives. But rather than that, we are here, standing in the presence of God, worshiping God—not because we’re smarter, not because we figured it out, not because we’re better—just simply on the basis of the goodness and grace of God. For reasons only God knows, He chose you to stand in His presence and experience His favor forever.

If for no other reason, for that reason alone we as the people of God gather and say, “Hallelujah, praise the Lord, for the Lord is good!”

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