

August 16/17, 2003

Psalms of Life, VII

Praise the LORD!

Psalm 148

Pastor Bryan Clark

About a month or so ago we used Psalm 150 as a basis to talk about worship. We're going to do something similar this morning, using Psalm 148. When we did Psalm 150, we really talked about how we put together a worship service, how the plot or the flow works, and how we use different instruments to help communicate the message.

What we want to focus on this morning is the importance of engaging our minds when we worship—to be intentional about thinking and engaging in the words, the theology, and what we're doing when we're worshiping. It's very important to realize there are no spiritual points that are given just because you walk in this building through these doors and sit in a pew for 75 minutes. The only way there is spiritual value is if you participate, if you engage, if you think about what we're doing here. So that's really what we want to focus on this morning. One writer puts it this way:

Above all, sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this, attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually.

That sounds like it comes right out of a contemporary book on worship, but actually it was in the front of a hymnal compiled by John Wesley, written in 1761. It's just a reminder that these are not new issues. We as the people of God need to be very intentional, very focused in what we do, and that's our desire this morning.

Some of the different elements we will experience this morning will include the reading of Scripture and some other readings. I think oftentimes when somebody starts to read something we kind of check-out. Our minds wander and we wait for the next song. Instead we need to concentrate on what is being read. What is being taught? What are we being told about God and what is our response to that? There's also going to be a video that displays the majesty of God's creation. The theme of Psalm 148 is to praise God because He is the Creator, and to visually be reminded of the majesty, the beauty, and the awesomeness of what God has made. So the video is not for our entertainment—it is to enhance our worship. Later on there will be a power point presentation with the same purpose. One other thing that is unique about today's service is that all of the music will be done *a cappella*—no instruments except the jimbay which is just covering a little rhythm. The reason for that is sometimes we get all hung up on different instruments and our likes and our dislikes. So I want to move it all out of the way this morning and I want us to just focus on the words, the substance, the content of our worship.

Sometimes people make the comment, "Oh, I just love the old hymns. I wish we'd sing more old hymns." And I often pursue that and ask them which ones they really like. I often ask, "What does that hymn teach you about God? What's the theology?" Usually when I ask that question I just get a blank stare, because they don't know. What they're really saying is, "I like that style of music." I get the same thing from people when they say, "I really like these contemporary choruses." "Really, what's your favorite? What does that teach you about God? What's the theology there?" They say, "Well, I really don't know" and they just give a blank stare, because what they're really saying is, "I like the tone. I like that melody. I like that style of music."

This isn't a concert series. That's not what worship is about. We need to cut through that stuff and get to the substance, the theology, the truth—that's what worship is all about. So that needs to be our focus this morning. This isn't 75 minutes where we come in and flop down and take a break. It's 75 minutes where we concentrate, we engage and we think, and we worship.

A number of years ago I was at a funeral home with a family who had just lost a loved one. They were in the viewing room and people would come and share their condolences and leave. I remember vividly this woman who entered the viewing room, went right to the widow who was grieving the loss of her husband, and started in this litany of her aches and pains and struggles and hardships. For about 15 minutes it was all about her and her suffering, and when she was done, she left. I found myself just appalled that someone could be that self-absorbed, that in this hour of this widow's grief, it was still all about her. As I reflected on that experience, I guess one of the things that caused me to be appalled at that is because I see far too much of that in my own heart. It appalls me when I see it there. The reality is, I'm very selfish. The reality is, every single person in this room is very selfish. We are very self-absorbed. That's the bent of our heart. It's really only the power and presence of Jesus within us that makes us any other way. To go from being very egocentric to becoming Theo centric—centered on God—is a hard thing. That's a supernatural thing.

It doesn't help that we live in a culture that feeds our selfishness. It's what I call a consumer culture. We live in a culture that bombards us everyday with a message that says, "it's all about me." It's all about me and my tastes, my likes and my dislikes, my desires—making me happy. I'm bombarded with that message everyday, and I can become convinced that it really is all about me.

Then I come to worship. And I can very easily find myself not a worshiper, but a consumer. I find myself thinking it's all about me and what I like: the instruments I like and the worship teams I like and the styles of music I like. When I was on vacation the last couple of weekends I went to a couple different churches in town. I went to Zion, which is downtown, and I went to Faith Bible, out here on 84th. They are two very fine churches that are pastored by friends of mine. In both of the churches someone came up to me and said, "Oh...checking out the competition?" And in both cases my response was, "No...getting to know the family." We're not competing. These are friends of mine. I would do anything in my power to help their churches grow. I was just meeting more of the family. But I also knew before I went, that if I didn't properly prepare my heart, I would go as a consumer. I would go as a critiquer. I would go as someone trying to learn some new ideas. I didn't want to go that way. I just wanted to go and to worship. I wanted to go and think about God; I wanted to delight in Him. But I had to be very intentional about making sure my heart was where it needed to be or that wouldn't have happened.

I would suggest to you that unless you are very intentional about making sure you have the heart of a worshiper, not the heart of a consumer, it will not happen. I believe the pull is so strong and the message around is so powerful, the bent of our heart just leans that way. Unless we are very intentional and determined to be worshipers, we will find ourselves as consumers. We find ourselves making comments like this: "Did you like that service? Do you like that music? Do you like that worship? Or "I really like this" or "I don't like that." Do you know what? Those are the comments of consumers.

I'm going to tell you a little secret this morning and let's just keep it between us. When it comes to the worship service, it's not about you. It's not. It's not about you; it's not about me. It's not about your likes. It's not about your dislikes. It's not about your personal preferences. It's not

about you. It's about *God*. We don't come to delight in certain worship teams or certain instruments or certain styles of music. We come to delight in God.

It's always interesting to me that on the same week you'll have people who complain about all kinds of things in the service, and somebody else who will say, "I just had this powerful experience of worship." Same hour...same service. The difference is the heart. One came as a worshiper. One came as a consumer.

You know, the question we should be asking is not what do you like, not what do I like, but what does *God* want? I don't think God is all hung up on instruments. I don't think He's hung up on styles of music. I think what matters to God is the condition of your heart and the condition of my heart. What ultimately matters in worship I can't control for you and you can't control for me. It is the intent of your heart. It is possible to come in and experience worship in such a way that we start to worship *worship* instead of worshipping God.

D. A. Carson says this:

Although there are things that can be done to enhance corporate worship, there is a profound sense in which excellent worship cannot be attained merely by pursuing excellent worship. In the same way that, according to Jesus, you cannot find yourself until you lose yourself, so also you cannot find excellent corporate worship until you stop trying to find excellent corporate worship and pursue God Himself. Despite the protestations, one sometimes wonders if we are beginning to worship *worship* rather than worship *God*. As a brother put it to me, it's a bit like those who begin by admiring the sunset and soon begin to admire themselves admiring the sunset.

Worship by the Book, D. A. Carson, Ed. , Zondervan, 2002

I think those are words we need to listen to. We need to be careful that we don't worship *worship*—that we don't get caught up in all the stuff and be distracted from God—but that we delight in Him.

Psalm 148 is an all-out call to praise the Lord. It's not a complicated psalm. It doesn't need a lot of explanation. I just want to read it through and make a few comments. It's really a psalm that calls everything and everybody to worship.

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; Praise Him in the heights! Praise Him, all His angels; Praise Him, all His hosts! Praise Him, sun and moon; Praise Him, all stars of light! Praise Him, highest heavens, and the waters that are above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the LORD, for He commanded and they were created. He has also established them forever and ever; He has made a decree which will not pass away. (v. 1-6, NASB)

It is very common throughout the Scriptures, that when you have a passage of Scripture that is calling people to praise and to worship God, it refers to God as the Creator God. It's the attempt of the biblical writers to establish the bigness of God. God is so big! God is so awesome! How do we come to grips with that? Consistently, the writers say, "He is the God of creation."

The reason for that is every way that we try to measure bigness, awesomeness, and majesty is limited to what we know, which is creation. It's all a relevant standard and we measure by the bigness of this or that. Finally, when we run out of standard, we go to the universe and we measure by the vastness of the universe. But the writers of Scripture still struggle with how to communicate

the bigness of God, other than to say, “He is bigger than that. He is the Creator of the standard—by which there is no measure.”

I don’t know how many times I’ve seen the video which was put together by our own video staff here at the church several years ago. I’ve seen it well over 20 times. Sometimes when I need a little encouragement and I need to gain some perspective, I just pop it in and watch it. I’m always taken back by the majesty of what God has made. It is spectacular—the beauty of God. But more than that, how is it possible that God just spoke and it was? I mean, really, how big is this God? I need to be reminded of that, because it reminds me that no matter what I’m facing today, God is big enough.

Some of you are struggling and you’re hurting. You’re going through some very difficult times. I understand that. But what you need to be reminded of is that God is so big, there is nothing in your life that is too big for Him. There is no such thing as hopeless, because of who God is. That’s the God of creation.

The psalmist goes on:

Praise the LORD from the earth, sea-monsters and all deeps; fire and hail, snow and clouds; stormy wind, fulfilling His word; mountains and all hills; fruit trees and all cedars; beasts and all cattle; creeping things and winged fowl; kings of the earth and all peoples; princes and all judges of the earth; both young men and virgins; old men and children.

Let them praise the name of the LORD, for His name alone is exalted; His glory is above earth and heaven. And He has lifted up a horn for His people, praise for all His godly ones; even for the sons of Israel, a people near to Him. Praise the LORD! (v. 7-14, NASB)

It’s interesting in verse 14 when he talks about a horn. The horn is a metaphor for strength. The psalmist is saying that God has lifted up strength for His people. What is that? Well, he tells us: it’s the *praise* that comes from His godly ones.

When the people of God gather together and worship, it is our strength. It is our distinctive; it’s what sets us apart. We are a worshiping people. It is in worship that we are reminded of who God is and who we are and what He has done and what He can do. Last week Jeff walked you through Psalm 73—a psalm of Asaph, who was a worship leader in Israel. Asaph was ready to give it all up, to walk away. The turning point of the psalm is when it says, “Then he entered the sanctuary of God.” He worshiped. When he entered into the presence of God and worshiped, he regained the perspective of who God is and who he is, what lasts forever and what is temporal, and what ultimately matters. And he got back in alignment because he worshiped.

That becomes our strength. That becomes our stronghold, our substance. I would suggest to you that there is not a Christian on the face of the planet that is mature enough that he or she does not need regular, consistent corporate worship. The power of the culture is just too strong. We start to lose perspective. We start to forget what matters. We start to live for ourselves. It’s when the people of God come together in corporate worship that we’re reminded of who God is, who we are, what lasts forever, what doesn’t, what gives us significance, what we live for. It puts everything back into perspective. And we need that. It is our strength.

Now if that's true, then we need to make sure that our worship is effective—that our worship is authentic. In order to do that, I want to offer just a few suggestions for you to consider that might help make your worship more meaningful week in and week out.

The first thing that we need to remember is that worship is not something we turn on and off like a switch. Worship is a way of life. When we come together to worship corporately, it is an outflow of what we've been doing individually all week long. Now it is possible to come as a consumer and just flip a switch and have an emotional experience, feel better about yourself, and leave. But that's not worship. That's being a consumer. To truly worship, it's a way of life. It's how I think and it's how I live... all week long. Under the New Covenant, the very presence of God dwells within me. I am now the temple of the very Spirit of God, and I worship continually. It's how I live my life. And when we come together corporately we celebrate that together.

Now, I'll be honest with you: there are times when I come to worship that I feel like I just hit the ceiling. I feel like I can't dial in on God; I'm not connected. And when that happens, it reminds me it's because that's how I lived all week. I really didn't give God a lot of thought. I was busy doing my own thing in my own power, and when I tried to flip the switch and worship it wasn't there. But that offers for me a rebuke that reminds me that's how I lived all week. It reminds me I don't want to live that way, and I begin to pull things back into alignment and I'll do better. That's part of the power of worship. In order for worship to be effective, we have to prepare for worship. We have to be in the right frame of mind. We have to think about what we're doing and prepare ourselves.

When I was in college I determined this routine I would go through before I took an exam, especially the big ones—the midterms and the finals. I had my routine and as long as I could go through my routine, I did very well. Remember those mornings in college when you oversleep and you go scrambling to take the test? On those days I couldn't do my routine, so I was a mess and I did poorly. I just couldn't get my mind engaged.

Well, I think that's what happens in worship. We get up and we scramble about until we finally plop in the pew. We catch our breath and we think we can just turn it on. But it doesn't work that way. You have to be very intentional. You have to be very thoughtful. You have to think about the fact, *I'm going to worship. I'm going to dial in. I'm going to concentrate.* That's part of our worship.

If that's true, I'm going to do some serious meddling here. I think we need to be on time. Now, understand if it's a choice between coming late or not coming at all, then come late. But I'd rather you come on time...for your sake. It's really not possible to come in halfway through and just pick up the plot or the flow where it is, then focus on God. It just doesn't work. All week long we manage to make it to work on time. Can't we give God that? It's important to establish ourselves so that we get there on time, take a deep breath, and prepare ourselves to enter into the presence of God. I know there are some people who are convinced that they aren't late if the sermon hasn't been preached yet. And I guess that would work, if everything before the sermon was just like a warm-up. But it's not. It's worship from beginning to end. And it all is important and it all matters.

If this is true, then I also think it's important that we stay until it's over. We have a little problem with that in some of our services. As soon as the "Amen" of the sermon comes, people scramble for the door. Now I understand there's a mess in the parking lot, and I understand there's a mess at the restaurants and everything else. Some of you have employment issues. I understand that. That's fine. But some of you are just trying to beat the crowd.

When God speaks to us through His Word, sometimes at the end it takes some time to process that and seal it up, so it isn't lost when you step out into the chaos of the hallway. That's what the last few songs are always designed to do. They're to help us think and to process—in a sense, to kind of wrap things up and seal it so that God's Word doesn't just dissipate as soon as you walk out the door. It's also important to remember there are people sitting next to you that are making life-changing decisions. We need to respect that. We need to minimize interruption and let them have their time with God. This is just 75 minutes once a week. We need to take a deep breath and stay until it's done.

Also in that vein, I think we need to make corporate worship a priority. I think there's a rhythm of life that's established in Scriptures of one day in seven that we come together corporately and we focus on God. That's an important rhythm. I realize there are 101 things in the culture that are bombarding you, crying out for your time and attention. You have to sort through what's going to be important and what you are going to commit to. There was a day in our culture where people left Sunday morning alone, but those days are long gone. Sunday morning is a very busy time, and you have to make the decision whether this is going to be important or not. I encourage you to think about it.

I believe these are some things that, if you think about them, will help week in and week out to make worship more meaningful.

Our Father, we are thankful that You are a God who is so worthy of our worship that every thing and every person You have created is to "praise the Lord" because You are worthy. Lord, we don't want to be consumers. We want to be worshipers. Lord, help us to remember that it isn't all about us; it's all about You.