

Psalm 145:1-3, 8-14 Colossians 3:12-17
"The Humility of Hallelujah"

The beginning of wisdom is reverence for the Lord. The Bible affirms this over and over again. Reverence for the Lord is one of core themes of the Old Testament Book of Psalms.

When we think of the psalms, we think of songs and prayers that comprise the hymnbook of the Old Testament people, songs and prayers that have been chanted and recited by Jews and Christians down through the ages. The word "psalms" comes from the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, and literally means "songs." But in Hebrew the word originally meant "praises," a book of praises.

The word "praise" immediately catches our attention, because many of the psalms, if we read them, come across as complaints, calls to God for aid by helpless and hurting people. It forebodes our modern world with people often complaining. A foremost psalms scholar named Herman Gunkel once said that "the prayer of complaint is the backbone of the psalter." So the title "Book of Praises" seems inappropriate and misleading, like a smiley face pasted on the cover of a book or a spoonful of sugar to make the medicine go down.

A principal at an Illinois school once made a promise to fourth graders that if they would read 4 books in one month he would climb a tree in the school yard and read a book to them. They all read 4 books, and the principal climbed an elm tree as promised. The kids were all smiles and squeals.

When he stood on a first limb, they shouted, "higher." He smiled back, and climbed higher. On a second limb, he smiled down, and they shouted, "climb higher." Climbing on, he affixed himself precariously to a very high limb, but suddenly stopped smiling and climbing. He heard the shouts below. "Jump."

Despite our tendencies to complain and sugar coat things, especially spiritual things, the Book of Psalms does something else. Its message is that the goal of all prayers, no matter how our lives are filled with complaints, hurts, rages, and problems, the goal of all our prayers is to praise the Lord.

The structure of the Book of Psalms makes this very clear. The book is divided into 5 sections, paralleling the 5 books of the Law. Each section is separated by a benediction of praise. The first section concludes with Psalm 41:13, "Praise the Lord, the God of Israel! Praise him now and forever. Amen! Amen!" The second section concludes with Psalm 72:19, "Praise his glorious name forever! May his glory fill the whole world. Amen! Amen!" The third section concludes with Psalm 89:52, "Praise the Lord forever! Amen! Amen!" The fourth section concludes with Psalm 106:48, "Praise the Lord, the God of Israel; praise him now and forever! Let everyone say, 'Amen.' Praise the Lord." The fifth section concludes with Psalm 150:6, "Praise the Lord, all living creatures. Praise the Lord." Coupled with these 5 benedictions is observation that the word "hallelujah," begins 11 psalms and ends 13 other psalms.

Psalm 145 was written as an anthology of praises, gleaned from many other psalms. The psalm is arranged in the form of an acrostic, using each of the 22 Hebrew alphabet letters to begin a sentence of praise. Psalm 145 extolls a single subject of praise, excluding life's laments, complaints, confessions, and perplexities. Psalm 145 proclaims praise that goes on and on till the alphabet runs out, telling us that life from A to Z, no matter what its meanderings, is to end in praise to God. This endless praise theme is further illustrated by the ending of the Book of Psalms, an ending that includes a doxology of 5 praise psalms, where the sounds of the praise are given to the wind, the sea, monsters, humans, and musical instruments.

Over and over the Book of Psalms tells us that no matter how many times, whether in desperation or doubt, no matter how many times we cry out to God "how long, how long," our prayers are always to find their way to the doorstep of praise. We all know this may take awhile.

Popular essayist Robert Fulgham writes about how he once found himself at a little joint where people came to eat, drink, shoot pool, and dance. It was 11:00pm on a Saturday night, but everything was quiet and little was happening. Then in walked a motorcycle gang, followed by an old Indian with braids, beaded vest, army surplus pants, tennis shoes, and the ugliest face anyone had ever seen. He looked like he was on his last legs, and sat in a corner sipping a drink. But when the band began to play a version of "Jailhouse Rock," he shuffled over to a motorcycle mama and asked her to dance. Amused, she got up with a shrug and obliged.

What was amazing was this old Indian could dance, nothing wild but just effortless action, turning his partner ever which way but loose, making her look good. The floor cleared for them, the band wound down, but the drummer kept the beat. The motorcycle band shouted for the band to continue, and it did, with the Indian dancing on alone when the motorcycle mama blew a gasket. He danced all over the floor. He danced with a chair, while the crowd cheered. The he said, "What're waiting for? Let's DANCE! And the band and crowd went off like a bomb, dancing all around the tables, behind the counters, circling the pool tables, dancing for themselves, for God, for Mammon, dancing in the face of life's problems, its hospital rooms, mortuaries, funerals, cemeteries. And for awhile, nobody died.

This dancing echoes the Book of Psalms. Sometimes it takes awhile to get us to dance and praise. But no matter how long it takes, no matter how many problems, detours, complaints, rages, depressions, losses, struggles, it is a wonderful thing when praise breaks forth. As Psalm 150 puts it, "Praise the Lord! Praise him for the mighty things he has done. Praise his supreme greatness. Praise him with trumpets. Praise him with harps and lyres. Praise him with drums and dancing. Praise the Lord."

It is intriguing that the English word for "praise" comes from a Latin word meaning "price." And from this word for "price" we get similar words like "prize," "expensive," "valuable," "appreciate," and perhaps best of all, the word "precious." To praise is to declare what is precious before God. All through the Book of Psalms what is precious is identified: God, God's presence, God's salvation, God's protection, God's justice, God's creation, God's word in the Law, God's people.

A Jewish tailor once went to his rabbi with a dilemma. He told the rabbi that if people came to the tailor shop occasionally and told him he was a good tailor, the compliment could keep him going for weeks on end. But if they came to him *every day*, telling him what a good tailor he was, it would drive him crazy. Then he asked the rabbi, "Is God so insecure that He needs us, hundreds of people, praising the divine every day, morning, night, and noon? It seems like it would drive God crazy." "Ah," the rabbi said, "You are absolutely right. You have no idea how hard it is for God to listen to all our praises, hour after hour, day after day. But God knows how important it is for us to utter that praise, so in His great love for us, He tolerates all our prayers."

We often have to learn praise and gratitude. I once heard of a man who wrote "thank you" on every check as he paid his bills, especially his water bill. Despite chemicals and strange tastes in the water, he remembered that his forebearer had to draw water from a well in the cold of winter, worrying that the well would go dry in the summer. So he wrote "thank you," we might say "hallelujah" on every check.

Remember how I said earlier that the word "hallelujah" begins 11 psalms and ends 13 others. Canadian song writer Leonard Cohen didn't miss this ancient occurrence, when some years ago he wrote the song *Hallelujah*, which has become one of my favorites, especially as sung by a group called the Canadian Tenors.

"Hallelujah" means "hallelu" or "praise," praise"yah," which is the shortened name for "yahweh" or "the Lord." Cohen wrote over 80 drafts of the melancholic, fragile, uplifting lyrics, which were used in the movie *Shrek* and were based on OT stories about King David, Samson, and a relationship ending in Cohen's own life. I want to quote just three verses.

"Now, I've heard there was a secret chord
That David played, and it pleased the Lord
But you don't really care for music, do you?
It goes like this, the fourth, the fifth,
The minor fall, the major lift
The baffled king composing hallelujah.
Hallelujah. Hallelujah Hallelujah. Hallelujah.

You say I took the name in vain
I don't even know the name
But if I did, well really, what's it to ya?
There's a blaze of light in every word
It doesn't matter what you heard
The holy or the broken hallelujah.
Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah.

I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch
I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you
And even though it all went wrong
I'll stand before the lord of song
With nothing on my tongue but hallelujah

Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah."

Leonard Cohen gave his own commentary on the song. "This world is full of conflicts and full of things that cannot be reconciled. But there are moments when we can reconcile and embrace the whole mess, that's what I mean by 'hallelujah.' The song explains that many kinds of hallelujahs have equal value. It's a desire to affirm my faith in life, not in some formal religious way, but with enthusiasm, with emotion. So no love, no eros or praise for music, but a huge hug for every situation life offers us."

As Cohen suggest, our hallelujahs, whether holy or broken, can produce the reverence of wonder and love for God in our hearts and lives. And this reverence, this holy shudder, this holy shiver, is the essence of all spiritual wisdom. I would call this the humility to give forth holy or broken, but no matter what, hallelujahs.

One of my favorite essayists, Brian Dolye, who wrote for the *Portland Magazine* before his untimely death from a brain tumor at age 60, had this to say about humility, and I am going to expand his word "humility" to my words "the "humility of hallelujah."

"You cannot control anything. You cannot control or command everything. You cannot fix and repair everything. You cannot protect your children from pain and loss and tragedy and illness. You cannot be sure that you will always be in the same relationships or happy in those relationships. You cannot be sure you will always be employed, or healthy, or relatively sane. All you can do is face the world with quiet grace and hope you make a sliver of difference." "The humility of hallelujah does not mean self-abnegation, lassitude, detachment; it's more a calm recognition that you must trust in that which does not make sense, that which is unreasonable, illogical, silly, ridiculous, crazy by the measure of most of our culture. You must trust that you being the best possible you matters somehow. That trying to be an honest and tender parent will echo for centuries through your tribe. That doing your chosen work with creativity and diligence will shiver people far beyond your kin. That being an attentive and generous friend and citizen will prevent a thread or two of the social fabric from unraveling. And you must do all of this with the certain knowledge that you will never get proper credit for it, and in fact the vast majority of things you do right will go utterly unremarked. The humility of hallelujah is the final frontier.

When we are young we build a self, a persona, a story in which to reside, or several selves in succession, or several at once, sometimes: when we are older, we take on other roles and personas, other masks and duties; and you and I both know men and women who become trapped in the selves they worked so hard to build, so desperately imprisoned that sometimes they smash their lives simply to escape who they no longer wish to be; but finally, I think, if we are lucky, if we read the book of pain and loss with the humility of hallelujah, we realize we are all broken and small and brief, that none among us is ultimately more valuable or rich or famous or beautiful than another; and then, perhaps, we begin to understand something deep and true about the humility of hallelujah."

"This is what I know: that the small is huge, that the tiny is vast, that pain is part and parcel of the gift of joy, and that this is love, and then there is everything else. You either walk toward love or away from it with every breath you draw. The humility of hallelujah is the road to love. The humility of hallelujah, maybe, is love. That could be. I wouldn't know; I'm just a muddle and conundrum shuffling slowly along the road, gaping in wonder, trying to just see and say what is, trying to leave shreds and shards of ego along the road like wisps of litter and chaff."

In these days of a pandemic, the loss of normalcy, a struggling economy, virtual this or virtual that, racial unrest, the uncertain future of a coming political election, we might humbly read and pray and sing the Book of Psalms over and over again, echoing "hallelujah" in our hearts, remembering the words of Psalm 145:10, "All your creatures, Lord, will praise you, and all your people will give you thanks. Every day I will thank you. I will praise you forever and ever."