

Doxology
Psalm 150
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The Hebrew “Hallelujah” is translated into English as “Praise the Lord.” Commenting upon both the Hebrew “Hallelujah” and the English “Praise the Lord” the Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible tells us that this is a form of doxology. Now doxology itself is a hymn or form of words containing an ascription of praise to God. So if you put hallelujah, praise the Lord, and doxology all together, what do you get? An old mule. At least that is how my dad told a joke that he loved.

A newcomer to town needed a mule, and a local farmer had one for sale. After they talked together and agreed on a price, the farmer said, “This old mule is named Doxology. The reason I named her Doxology is because to get her to start running, you simply say ‘Praise the Lord.’ Then, when you want her to stop, all you do is say ‘Hallelujah’.” The newcomer listened intently, paid the agreed purchase price, and took Doxology home. Later that day he took the mule out for a ride. To get her moving he said “Praise the Lord”. Sure enough, the old mule started out and was soon up to a pretty good speed. Things were going along well until he realized that old Doxology was headed toward a cliff. Doxology had picked up a good head of steam by this point, and the owner got anxious. He knew it was time to stop the mule, but as the cliff drew near, his mind went blank. He couldn’t remember what to say to make the mule stop. Faster and faster the mule ran, nearer and nearer came the cliff. Just as they reached the point of no return the owner remembered how to stop the horse. He shouted out, “Hallelujah”. Immediately Doxology came to a stop and not a step too soon. The owner gave a huge sigh of relief, looked over the cliff, wiped his forehead, and said, “Praise the Lord.”

Years ago Fred Craddock preached a sermon titled “Doxology”.¹ He didn’t preach about Doxology as a mule, but rather as a companion, a presence in his life, even as a friend. What he found was that life was so much richer, more meaningful, and more beautiful when he brought Doxology along with him. He tells of inviting Doxology to the family dinner table. His kids were young at the time and around the table they would talk about their day. Fred would ask his kids, “What was the worst thing that happened today”? His son said, “The school bell rang at 8:30 am.” When he asked, “What was the best thing that happened?” the son said, “The bell rang again at 3:30.” And the ice was broken, tongues were loosened, and everyone shared about their day. At the end of supper Craddock said all agreed that Doxology belonged at the table.

Having Doxology join him at the dinner table was such a good experience, when he went downtown the next day on some errands, he brought Doxology along. And having Doxology with him made the day different, not so routine. “We laughed at a child losing a race with an ice cream cone, his busy tongue unable to stop the flow down to his elbow. We studied the face of a tramp staring in a jewelry store window and wondered if he were remembering better days or hoping for better days. We spoke to the banker, standing with thumbs in vest before a large plate-glass window, grinning as one in possession of the keys of the kingdom. We were delighted by women shoppers clutching bundles and their skirts at blustery corners. It was good to have Doxology along.”

But then Fred, a pastor, made a stop at St. Mary’s Hospital to see Betty. “Betty was dying with cancer and the gravity of my visit prompted me to leave Doxology in the car.” That makes sense, doesn’t it? You might take Doxology around town to shops and street corners, you might have Doxology sit at your dinner table, but would you take Doxology, Hallelujah, Praise the Lord into a room where a woman is dying of cancer? Craddock didn’t feel it was appropriate, so he left Doxology outside. When he got to her room Betty was awake and glad to see him. Craddock avoided the subject of death, but Betty said, “It’s all right. I know, and I have worked through it. God has blessed me with

¹ Fred Craddock, “As One Without Authority”, 163-168.

a wonderful family, good friends, and much happiness. I am grateful. I do not want to die, but I am not bitter.” Craddock said, “Before I left, she was the one who offered the prayer.” When he got back to his car, Doxology was just sitting there. Doxology asked, “Should I have been there with you?” Craddock said, “Yes.” And with that yes he began to understand that Hallelujah and Praise the Lord and Doxology are important even in times of sadness and loss and grief and pain.

The sermon then comes alive as Craddock recounts how in theological crisis, considering the great mystery of Jews and Christians being loved by the same God Paul the Apostle wrestles, struggles, laments, and then praises the Lord for his unsearchable judgments and his inscrutable ways. He tells of hearing a Judy Garland-type singer in London who sang popular and contemporary songs and old favorites, and then sang words from Psalm 121, “I will lift up my eyes to the hills; from when does my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.” Privileged to meet the artist after the performance he asked if she felt strange singing words of praise to God in a public setting. To which she said, “If you knew what kind of person I was, and what I was doing, and what has happened since I gave my life to God, then you would know how appropriate it is for me to sing God a song of praise.”

Doxology is important and necessary and vital for our lives. Craddock is not only a preacher but also a seminary professor. He says that sometimes seminary students spend so much time thinking and studying and talking *about* God that they forget to talk *with* God. He has seen students flounder when they lose their relationship with God, when they lose their Doxology.

He ends the sermon by telling about the phone call he received that told him his beloved brother had suffered a heart attack and died. He was right in the middle of teaching a class when he got the news. His mind raced as he thought of all he had to do, getting the kids ready to travel, arranging for someone to cover his class, taking care of the dog in his absence, the paper and the mail. Finally the car was packed, the gas tank filled, and the family all in their seats. As he backed out of the

driveway his wife asked, “I hope you brought Doxology.” Craddock admits that at that point he had completely forgotten Doxology. And then he says, “The truth is now clear: if we ever lose our Doxology we might as well be dead.”

If we ever lose our Doxology, we might as well be dead. Psalm 150 is the final psalm in the book of Psalms. It is the last psalm. It comes after a series of other psalms that display a rich and wonderful relationship of a people with their God. It also comes after a series of other psalms that display a raw and weary relationship of a people with their God. The psalms have some of the most joyful and exultant choruses of praise and some of the deepest laments and cries of pain, disappointment, despair, and even abandonment.

If you join the choir that sings the psalms, you will find yourself staring at the stars in the heaven and singing, “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.” You will be handed a kazoo and a couple of tin pan lids and told to make a joyful noise unto the Lord. You will sit by the flames of fire at a camp meeting and join in a sacred recitation that begins with “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me...” and will not end until you have celebrated every single one of God’s good blessings as you “Forget not all his benefits.”

But if you join the choir that sings the psalms, there will be times when you forsake the beautiful adornment of robes and you take up sackcloth and ashes, lifting your voice in lament. “How long, O Lord, how long?” “I am a worm.” “My enemies mock me and taunt me.” “My friends betray me.” You will even stutter and sputter out the words of abandonment that haunted us last week as our Lord and Savior cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.” Those words are in Psalm 22, and as members of the choir those words will be on our tongues.

The psalms give evidence that life will bring glorious moments like the Exodus, when the Red Sea parts and you dance right through those walls of water on dry ground. And those same psalms will plant your feet firmly in Babylon, a strange land where the people of God languished in exile, filled only with memories of their sacred city and temple in rubble and ruins, which is a pretty good description of their spiritual life as they wept by the rivers of Babylon. These very psalms are ones that depict the breadth and depth, the mountaintop highs and the valley lows of a people named Israel, and these psalms are also so very personal and poignant.

Many a time in periods of loneliness, doubt, disappointment, and deepest despair, I have prayed with the one who wrote the 42nd Psalm, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. Where can I go and meet with God?” My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, “Where is your God.” So that psalmist prays, “My soul is downcast within me.” My guess is we all have known that kind of longing, that kind of anxiety, that kind of discouragement, that kind of despair that says, “My soul is downcast within me.”

It is at the end of all these psalms, after victories and celebrations and after defeats and desperation that we come to a great triumph of faith. Beginning with Psalm 146 it is clear that the people of God, and it is clear that the individuals who make up that people, have not forgotten their Doxology. Psalm 146 begins and ends with this powerful affirmation of faith. “Praise the Lord.” At the beginning and the end we find the words, “Praise the Lord!” That is how we translate the Hebrew phrase, “Hallelujah!” Psalm 146, and then 147, and 148 and 149, each and every one of these psalms begins and ends, has bookends of praise, Hallelujah and Praise the Lord. Which brings us to Psalm 150. Not only do we have the bookends of praise, every single line of the psalm, every single line and every single phrase is soaked and saturated and dripping and anointed with praise.

Without ignoring the extreme struggle that it is to be human beings, just to be human beings but also to be human beings in relationship with a living God, the people affirm their faith, their trust in God, by saying, "Praise the Lord." My belief is they realize God has been with them in every single situation, in the rejoicing and in the weeping. My belief is they have discovered that God kept his promise that he would never leave them nor forsake them, that he really did walk with them not only in green pastures and still waters but perhaps more importantly, perhaps most importantly, even through the valley of the shadow of death, their Lord, their Shepherd, their God had been with them. My belief is they came to realize the words they had been singing so long and so often were more than mere words. They came to realize and to rest secure in the one whose steadfast love endures forever. They came to realize they not only belonged to God and were blessed by God and provided for by God and strengthened by God and sustained by God, they came to realize they were loved by God. And because of that, there was no way they would ever forget their Doxology. They carried it with them everywhere they went.

I wonder if those tearful and fearful women who went to the tomb of Jesus just one week ago, along with their sadness and their sorrow also brought with them their Doxology. They did not deny the death of Jesus and they did not deny that it broke their hearts. But even with their tears and their heartache these women of faith knew that the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. And if they brought Doxology with them to the grave, how much more did those words of Hallelujah and Praise the Lord resound from their joyful hearts when they heard the good news, "He is risen from the dead."

People of God, children of God, beloved, we who are so deeply loved by God that he would send his one and only Son to be our Savior and our salvation, dear friends in faith, let us never forget our Doxology. Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!