

# Eternal Praise

## Psalm 111

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In Ephesians 5 we read a curious word of instruction. “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord. (Ephesians 5:19) I wonder what exactly Paul intended when he wrote those words. What might it look like to speak to one another in psalms? If we were to take Paul literally, the psalms would provide us a wealth of words with which to speak to one another. In some ways we already practice speaking to one another in psalms. It is not unusual to hear in worship one person say, “This is the day the Lord has made.” The response returns, “Let us rejoice and be glad in it.” In that brief exchange we are speaking in psalms to one another, using the words from Psalm 118:24.

In Psalm 111, our passage of scripture for the morning, we hear the psalms speaking to us a word of praise and adoration for our great and mighty God. When we hear the author speak to us in psalms we are swept up in celebration of the works and deeds of God. From the opening “Praise the Lord” until the glorious ending “To him belongs eternal praise,” this psalm knows nothing but the wonder and awe of God’s works. When we speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs we speak the language of praise and adoration.

- I will extol the Lord with all my heart (v.1)
- Great are the works of the Lord (v.2)
- Glorious and majestic are his deeds (v.3)
- He has caused his wonders to be remembered; the Lord is gracious and compassionate (v.4)
- He provides...he remembers...he has shown (v.5,6)
- The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy (v.7)
- They are steadfast for ever and ever, done in faithfulness and uprightness (v.8)

- He provided redemption for his people...holy and awesome is his name (v.9)
- To him belongs eternal praise (v.10)

The one who wrote Psalm 111 literally throws down the gauntlet of praise. This is our God and we will rejoice and be glad in his steadfast love. So the command is to speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Let's respond to the psalmist and keep the conversation going. Let's speak together in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs. As Psalm 111 concludes with the words "To him belongs eternal praise," let us fire back, "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord all the lands. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs." (Psalm 100) And now the pace quickens. This speaking to one another in psalms, springs forth in a lively and praised-filled exchange. We must speak about the rule of God on this earth. "The Lord reigns, he is robed in majesty, the Lord is robed in majesty and armed with strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved." But we can't speak of the land without thinking of the surging seas. "The seas have lifted up, O Lord, the seas have lifted up their voice; the seas have lifted up their pounding waves. Mightier than the thunder of the great waters, mightier than the breakers of the sea—the Lord on high is mighty. (Psalm 93) Is it just the earth and the seas? I think not. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands...In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat." (Psalm 19) Well, now that you mentioned the heavens, might I add, "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth...When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what are we as human beings that you are mindful of us, that you care for us? Yet you have made us as humans a little lower than the heavenly beings and we are crowned with glory and honor...O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth." (Psalm 8) Well, if that is how it's going to be, then I think we should also say, "Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits..." (Psalm 103) Now we're talking. Now we're talking in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Now we're talking, so how about a little call and response.

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good  
*His love endures forever*

Give thanks to the God of gods  
*His love endures forever*

Give thanks to the Lord of lords:  
*His love endures forever*

To him who alone does great wonders,  
*His love endures forever*

Who by his understanding made the heavens,  
*His love endures forever*

Who spread out the earth upon the waters,  
*His love endures forever*

Who made the great lights—  
*His love endures forever*

The sun to govern the day,  
*His love endures forever*

The moon and stars to govern the night...  
*His love endures forever*

Give thanks to the God of heaven.  
*His love endures forever*

Once you start speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, when do you reach a stopping point? When does the conversation end? The psalmist has an answer. It is Psalm 150.

Buckle up, because this conversation is about to get loud and to echo down the halls with cymbals and to be accompanied with dancing and shouts of thanksgiving.

Praise the Lord!

Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord!

This is the last psalm, in a sense the last word, at least until you start the whole conversation over again because as we heard in Psalm 111, to our God belongs eternal praise. The praise of the Lord is an eternal loop, it ends and then it starts right back again at the beginning. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.

I was caught up in the joy of speaking in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, when God brought something to my attention that added just an extra bit of delight. As the image of trumpets and harps and lyres and cymbals was resounding in my head, a friend posted a funny little musical joke, and I just happened to read it as I was preparing the sermon. Apparently musicians have their own unique sense of humor, and although I am not musically inclined, I found myself pleasantly amused. How perfect was it to be preparing a sermon on speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, literally being told to make music to the Lord, and to find a picture of a group of bass players in an orchestra, under a banner alerting us that they are being led by the conductor in a rousing rendition of Beethoven's ninth symphony. In the cartoon the bass players are all holding alcoholic beverages and having a fine time as they play Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony. All of this makes sense when you read the caption that says, "It was the bottom of the ninth and the bassists were loaded." Now I must confess, once I saw that cartoon, I wondered what else musicians found humorous. Since we are on the theme of speaking to one another in musical terms, in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, I can't resist letting you in on some of their jokes.

- Middle C, E-flat and G walk into a bar. “Sorry”, the bartender says to the E-flat. “We don’t serve minors in here.”
- Q: What’s the difference between a piano and fish?
- A: You can’t tuna fish.
- Q: How do you fix a broken tuba?
- A: With a tuba glue.
- Q: What do you get when you throw a piano down a mineshaft? A-flat minor.
- Q: What message did Bach have on his answering machine?
- A: “The phone is Baroque, please call Bach later.”
- Q: Why did the pianist keep banging his head against the keys?
- A: He was playing by ear.
- What happens when you play Beethoven backwards?
- A: He decomposes.

Speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. The psalms are full of praises and it might even lead to some fun jokes about musicians and instruments bassists that are loaded in the bottom of the ninth. But I wouldn’t be surprised if some of you might be wondering if that is all it means to speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Certainly praise and adoration and joy and thanksgiving are the foundation of the psalms. But maybe you have noticed that praise and adoration and joy and thanksgiving are not all of the psalms. There is more to the psalms. There is a depth to the psalms that recognizes life can be difficult, extremely difficult, disappointing, at times devastating, leading to seasons of deep discouragement.

From the passage in Ephesians, it seems clear that Paul was aware that not all of life is a conversation filled with praise the Lord’s and Hallelujahs. Right before he calls on the believers to speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs he challenges them to make the most of every day, of every opportunity in life, because the days they are living in are evil. Apparently speaking in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs can equip and empower Christian believers to make the most of every opportunity. Instead

of being a sign that faith doesn't work when you face difficult times, the psalms, hymns and spiritual songs bring to life a faith that does work even when faced with the greatest of challenges. Remember, Paul knew suffering and hardship and imprisonment and betrayal and beatings.

When he spoke in psalms there must have been times when he prayed that common and frequent lament of the psalms, "How long, O Lord, how long?" He whose greatest desire was to be with Christ must have been able to relate to the ones in their bitter exile who cried out, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept." Paul, who said he longed to share in the sufferings of Christ knew that Jesus himself had prayed the psalm of abandonment, Psalm 22, crying out from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" To speak to one another in psalms means we join in a song of praise as we rejoice in the Lord's countless blessings. It also means we pray the prayers of those who are heartbroken and desperate for the healing power and presence of God to touch their lives. We pray with the longing of the one who said, "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. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'" Oh yes, we pray that deep and dark prayer that knows full well the taunting of a world that says, "Where is your God?" But when we pray we pray that difficult prayer all the way to the end, saying, "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God." (Psalm 42)

When we speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, we are speaking the whole gospel. We are speaking words that have given strength and comfort to believers in the deepest and darkest valleys. We are not sure exactly what Paul meant by hymns and spiritual songs, but it seems right to assume many of those hymns and spiritual songs come from the pages of the Old Testament. One of the most powerful passages in the Old Testament focuses on the Savior of the people of Israel being a servant, but a very particular type of servant. The particular type of servant is a suffering servant. The prophet Isaiah presents a servant whose suffering will be redemptive, whose suffering will bring healing and wholeness for others. The suffering servant from Isaiah 52 and 53 is referenced seven times in the New Testament (Matthew 8:17, Luke 22:37, John 12:38, Acts 8:32, Romans 10:16

and 15:21, and I Peter 2:22) For ones who had watched their Lord suffer and die, the spiritual song or hymn about a suffering servant is both poignant and powerful.

**“He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrow....he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed...for he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”**

(Selected verses from Isaiah 52:13-53:12)

When we speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, we are recounting that the one we call Savior and Lord is one whose suffering redeemed us, bought our lives back from death and destruction, and whose wounds were the means for our healing. That in itself is humbling and transforming. But there is another song, another spiritual song, another hymn the early church used. It served as our call to worship this morning. It is found in Philippians 2. It is a passage that portrays Jesus as a servant, and recounts his life, his death, and his resurrection. What sets this passage apart is that in this hymn the Apostle Paul calls on followers of Jesus to have the same attitude as Christ Jesus. He calls on us to be Christ like by having the same attitude as Christ, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and become obedient to death—even death on a cross!” It is this Jesus, the one who came as a servant, who suffered and died and was obedient to death, it is this Jesus who has been exalted to the highest place and to whom every tongue will confess that he is Lord. And it is this Jesus, this servant, of whom we are told to have the same attitude. Sing that psalm, that hymn, that spiritual song, and you see that to make the most of every opportunity is to be on a constant journey of emptying ourselves, giving our lives away for the sake of the kingdom, seeking to be found by seeking to be a servant. This is powerful stuff. This is how our God says to make the most of every opportunity.

I met with a group of men every Tuesday for twenty years. They were a great group of guys, but I never knew how our discussion would go. They used to enjoy ribbing me and teasing me and on those rare moments when I would make a mistake or foul things up, they loved to give me the business. So on the morning when I decided to use a hymn as our lesson, I wasn't sure how it would turn out. Would they follow my instructions or throw me to the lions. What I had in mind was to use a hymn that talks about how God is with us in all situations and how God will never leave us nor forsake us. The hymn is "How Firm a Foundation." The part about the firm foundation can be traced to the gospels where Jesus says everyone who hears his word and puts it into practice is like a person building on a solid foundation. In the center of the song are verses about going through fiery trials and deep waters. In Isaiah 43:2,3a we read, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

These men knew trials and tribulations. Many had served their country in World War II or in Korea. During the years together a good number had gone through cancer, several had to use walkers as they aged, more than a few had lost their wives, and for some they knew the deep sorrow of burying a child. I wondered what would happen if we spoke to one another in psalms, in hymns, and spiritual songs. So we did some sharing, some discussion, and then I gave each man a copy of the hymn, "How Firm a Foundation." I said I will read the first verse, and then I'll be quiet. I won't give any more instructions. But after a time of silence, somebody take the second verse and read it for us. And that is how we will cover all five verses. We will speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.

Holding my sheet of paper in my hands, the one with the words to the song on it, I said a little prayer, "Oh God, help these men to follow my instructions. Please help these men to follow my instructions." And then I read the first verse of the song.

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in God's excellent word. What more can be said than to you God hath said, to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

I finished the first verse, and then I waited. And waited. No one read the second verse. Oh well. No one read the second verse. But after a few moments, a few moments that felt like forever, someone started in on the second verse. It was Lamar. Lamar was a man of deep faith. Lamar was also a man who had experienced deep sorrow. His beloved wife Mary Francis contracted the HIV virus through a blood transfusion and she died of AIDS. He got involved reaching out to people with the AIDS virus and no sooner did he make friends than they would die. He knew deep sorrow and deep sadness, yet somehow Jesus Christ had grabbed hold of his life and along with deep sorrow and deep sadness Lamar had a faith that was even deeper. He knew about waters of sorrow and burning flames. Lamar was a dear friend, but even Lamar could not follow directions. I asked the men to read a verse of the song and Lamar came in on the second verse. But he wasn't reading the song. He was singing it. In a small, fragile, gentle, and humble voice, Lamar was singing. It was the sweetest sound you could ever imagine.

***“Fear not I am with thee, O be not dismayed,  
For I am thy God, I will still give thee aid.  
I'll strengthen, help thee, and cause thee to stand,  
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.”***

Lamar knew there were evil and difficult times and he knew death and suffering and loss. But more importantly than any of that, Lamar knew Jesus Christ, the servant who had suffered. And when we are counseled to make the most of every opportunity, when we are counseled to sing praise to the Lord, when we are counseled to speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, that moment when Lamar sang out will always stay with me. Why do we sing and speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs? Because Jesus is our firm foundation! Because Jesus will never, no never, no never forsake us. This is the good news of the gospel. This is the good news that empowers us to live faithfully and joyfully. This is the good news that causes us to follow Jesus Christ wholeheartedly and to make the most of every opportunity. This is the good news that we cannot keep to ourselves. We speak about it. We speak about it every day. We speak about it every single day, in psalms, in hymns, and in spiritual songs. We speak about it every single day because to our God belongs eternal praise. Hallelujah and thanks be to God.