

Praising the King for His unsearchable greatness

Psalm 145

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Introduction

Psalm 145 is an acrostic poem in which the first letter of each verse follows the order of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, from *aleph* to *tau* (like A-Z, but only 22 letters). Why would anyone submit themselves to the difficult task of ordering their thoughts about God according to the alphabet? Wouldn't that be like putting a straightjacket on your feelings and poetic expression? Probably the psalmist turns to this literary device as part of his effort to order his inner world according to the beauty of the God who has revealed Himself (did that ever occur to us?). This is an exercise in honor of language as the very vehicle of relationship and communication, and also a discipline in honor of the Word itself as the source of our life's meaning. *"The poet praises God with everything from A to Z ... The entire alphabet, the source of all words, is marshaled in praise of God"* (Adele Berlin).

This Psalm forms part of Book 5 (107-150); commentators believe it was compiled to reflect the Jews' attempts to rebuild their community life in the postexilic period. The fall of Jerusalem, the Davidic kingship, and the Babylonian exile had brought them face to face with the unfathomable depths of their spiritual brokenness, failure and idolatry; would God still honor His promises to David? They would need to draw on the faith of their ancestors to find the courage to rebuild their temple, restore their worship practices, and rediscover their identity in that frightful setting of warring world empires, among which Israel seemed like such a tiny drop in the ocean, and now with no king to lead them. So this psalm is the last of the 14 in book 5 that bear David's name in the superscription, and appropriately, he's leading the people in the celebration of *God as the true King over all generations of Israel* and over all peoples and all creation, because God was precisely the true source of identity and security they needed. So for those homesick Jews, longing for previous times in life (the "good ol' days"), the words of this psalm actually spoke a different spiritual reality into being: not like magic, but rather, connecting them to the comforting truth behind their painful situation: their God Yahweh still reigned, no matter how low they had fallen, no matter how broken they had been, no matter how dark or painful the circumstances they were facing.

With this song the psalmist –as well as those who were compiling these psalms into this particular order– invites us to enter into the intimacy of his confident prayer, celebrating the name and greatness of God, His works, character, and kingdom. In *these* troubled times, how worthwhile and relevant it is for us to meditate on the attitudes that the psalmist manifests here, because he's so sure of the caring nature of this God of the covenant, so enamored of the One he addresses as King of Israel. Let's explore briefly His reasons for such deeply felt praise ...

1) Celebrating His name and greatness (vv. 1-3)

David blesses the very name of God; ten times through the psalm he invokes the sacred name, the “*nomen tetragrammaton*” (“name of four letters” in Hebrew: **YHWH**). No longer pronounced in later Judaism for fear of violating the third commandment, it was cherished by the patriarchs, Moses, David, and generations of Israelites. While God does not allow physical images to represent Him, since nothing material can do justice to His reality, we are nevertheless permitted an audible representation, the sacred name with which He identified Himself to the patriarchs. With the knowledge of this name, we’re able to “**call on**” the maximum authority of the universe personally (since Gen. 4:26) and count on His nearness, His attention, and His salvation (according to Joel 2:32, where the same Hebrew verb “*qara*” is used, translated as *epikaleomai* in Rom. 10:13). That name is as great as the One who holds its authority, and David affirms his faith that he will have the delight of exalting Him every day of his life and throughout eternity. This God, “**worthy of utmost praise**”, radiates such greatness that it cannot be analyzed or investigated (v. 3). We humans can think about it, meditate on it, and probe it, but our intellect can never do more than scratch the surface, because it’s about so much more than rational comprehension: it’s about **CONVERSION!**

Take a moment to “cherish” the name of **Yahweh** with your mind and soul: “**the One who is,**” whom the NT reveals to us through **Yeshuah** (Jesus means “**Yahweh saves**”). His greatness can’t be scrutinized or figured out, but it can be experienced as worship, and the knowledge of Him is the deepest well on earth. Meditate a moment on this prayer:

*Dear Lord Jesus, how I bless Your NAME!
Thanks to Your grace, we will never be the same!
You’re so kind to take our blame and our shame.
You’re so strong our souls to tame and reclaim.
You’re so wise that on a cross you overcame.
You’re so loving that you set our hearts aflame!
There’s no limit to the greatness of Your fame!
Jesus, LORD! My lips caress Your NAME!*

2) Celebrating His works and character (vv. 4-7)

The psalmist will further expound on the greatness of the Lord fixing his gaze on His works and His character. They will be commended, declared, meditated on, spoken about, poured forth, and sung, according to these verses, which indicates the immense value that the psalmist attributes to God’s works. They are His witnesses and expressions of His glory and magnificence, revealing what He’s like: all-powerful, great, good, righteous. The greatest work the Hebrews of old remembered was the **exodus from Egypt** (manifesting His graciousness), just as the greatest work we remember from the NT was the **new “exodus”** which Jesus accomplished in His death and resurrection (revealing even more grace). Verse 8 is the testimony to God’s character which David inherited from the tradition dating back to Moses (Ex. 34:6): Yahweh had made Himself known specifically as “**compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, great in lovingkindness and truth** (also = **faithfulness**).” This group of words makes us think of other texts that recall this ancient Hebrew “creed”: David himself had used it in Ps. 86:15 and 103:8; the prophets Joel (2:13) and Jonah (4:2), as well as Nehemiah (9:17), demonstrate their knowledge of it (many others which use a smaller portion of the formula). When we reflect on Jonah’s knowledge of this faith content, it’s painful to realize that it didn’t change his inner priorities; he still hated those Assyrian enemies in Nineveh, and didn’t want to obey God precisely because of how merciful He was! May we not fall into such an awful hypocrisy of knowing the truth and not being changed by it! These phrases reflect the solid rock foundation of God’s revelation to Israel: it’s how He revealed Himself to His people since the beginning of their history, and culminatingly in the incarnation. If you truly know this, **you cannot remain the same!**

Take a moment to rehearse what God is truly like according to this ancient creed of the Israelites, just as they themselves would often repeat these words in order to remember what God was like and to give Him thanks for being this way: repeat the five key terms to yourself ... and let them send a shiver up your spine!

3) Verse 9

Verse 9 is the first **refrain of the psalm**, and it requires us to make a textual commentary. Most Masoretic texts of this psalm (9th-10th century) are lacking a verse with the Hebrew letter “nun” between vv. 13-14, but the Septuagint and the Dead Sea scrolls supply the verse, which happens to form a trio with vv. 9 and 17, which function as the refrain (= chorus) of the psalm. When we look at the three together, their parallelisms are immediately visible:

- **“Yahweh is GOOD to all, and His compassion is over all His works”** (v. 9).
- **“Yahweh is FAITHFUL in His words, and kind in all His works”** (v. 13b).
- **“Yahweh is RIGHTEOUS in all His ways, and kind in all His works”** (v. 17).

The reflection we would make regarding the refrain is how God’s works, His words, and His ways are in such perfect harmony, all pointing in the same direction: toward His goodness, His faithfulness, and His righteousness. May we confess and celebrate Him as worthy of our total confidence, “for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness or in health” – and even death will not be able to part us! A song of worship is a good response:

*We are a moment, you are forever, Lord of the ages, God before time.
We are a vapor, You are eternal, Love everlasting, reigning on high.
Holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, worthy is the Lamb who was slain.
Highest praises, honor and glory, Be unto Your name, be unto Your name.
We are the broken, You are the Healer, Jesus Redeemer, mighty to save.
You are the love song we’ll sing forever, Bowing before You, reigning on high.*

4) Celebrating the glory of God’s kingdom (vv. 10-13)

The psalmist continues to delight in the gracious character of God, emphasizing the glory of His kingdom (v. 11). When this King who made everything that is exercises His lordship, hope and glory dominate the horizon. His works praise Him and His saints bless Him (v. 10), and all are invited **“to make known to the children of Adam His powerful deeds and the glory of the majesty of His kingdom”** (v. 12). In other words, they had the privilege of announcing **a different kingdom** that would last forever (v. 13) – not like earthly kingdoms, where rulers come and go, with fluctuating power and glory. We today are the heirs of that same invitation to announce a kingdom that overcomes the ups and downs of earthly existence, and we are blessed with much more vision of this kingdom and its cost than they had (Lk. 12:32). So God expects more of us.

5) Celebrating what Yahweh does for the citizens of this kingdom (vv. 14-17) ...

- Yahweh himself **“upholds all who fall, and raises up all who are bowed down”** (the oppressed, v. 14). This refers to anyone who may be in any sort of distress: illness, injury, loss of a loved one, loss of a job, financial setback, divorce, humiliation ...
- **“the eyes of all”** are fixed on Yahweh because we all depend on Him for our sustenance (v. 15): our Provider.
- Yahweh is generous in **satisfying “the desire of every living thing”** (v. 16): the reference is to legitimate desires, not just any whim or fancy! We’re reminded of the NT injunction to ask, seek, and knock, with the result that we will receive, find, and experience an open door.

6) Celebrating the right response to this King (vv. 18-21)

- ***“The Lord is near to all who CALL on Him*** [Heb. *qara*: call, cry, name], ***to all who call on Him in truth.*”** There is great comfort in having help that is nearby, available when we need it – simply by learning to confess His name.
- The Lord ***“fulfills the desire of those who FEAR Him”*** (fear of the Lord). Clearly this kingdom came to humanity in its fullness in the long-awaited Son of David, the Person and work of Jesus, whom we have the privilege of invoking and serving, and He “satisfies our desire” by saving us (v. 19).
- The Lord preserves all who **LOVE** Him (treasure, cherish, delight in Him).
- The more we know Him, the more we will **SPEAK** His praise and **BLESS** His name – daily.

This King is the One who came to us personally in Jesus, to offer humanity His hand, His friendship and love, but we responded with all the worst we had inside – the rebellion that had been boiling in our hearts since the Garden of Eden. Our cup of rebellion would overflow in God’s face as we took the opportunity to “lay hands on Him,” blame Him for all our ills, and make Him pay for not letting us have our way! How should a Sovereign respond to such abject vileness, the worst crime in all of history? Jesus’ death was not planned by God so *that* He could forgive us – Jesus’ death was God’s climactic act of forgiveness – in person! Our maximum crime, in His face ... His maximum grace, in ours! This is the King whose love we celebrate in the Lord’s Supper ...