

Psalm 113

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 03 February 2019

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] You may have heard this story before, and I kind of hope that it's not true, but it may be true.

I genuinely don't know if it's true or not. But the story is told of a visitor who came into a church a bit like ours in terms of the church tradition of the church that this visitor came into.

And as the service began, the visitor, in a very audible way, began to cry out, praise the Lord, hallelujah.

As the minister said something or read a verse from the Bible, you know, this is the way this visitor behaved. So this was causing a little bit of, what shall we say, discomfort.

Perhaps it shouldn't have done, but it was unusual for the folks in this particular church. Until at one point, one of the elders approached the visitor and as discreetly as possible whispered in the visitor's ear, we don't praise the Lord in this church.

[1 : 1 8] Now, I'm sure that wasn't what he meant, but nonetheless, as I say, whether that's true or not, I kind of hope it's not, although it would be kind of funny if it was.

But anyway, now as I say, we can smile at a story. But we do well to remember that praising the Lord is what we are all about as God's people from beginning to end, from the rising of the sun to when it sets to take the words of the psalm that we have read.

And this psalm that we're going to spend some time thinking about this evening begins and ends with these very words, praise the Lord, or in the Hebrew word that we're familiar with as well, hallelujah.

There you'll see it in the footnote of the page there referring to the first and final verse or the first and final affirmation of the psalm, praise the Lord.

I want to reflect for a moment on this psalm under two headings. First of all, the God we praise. Who is this God to whom we direct our praise? What do we discover about our God in this psalm?

[2 : 2 8] But then also think a little bit about the manner of our praise as we are given instruction in this psalm on that matter also. But we'll begin by thinking about the God we praise.

And really, that involves jumping to verse four and what follows. And then we'll backtrack to the start of the psalm for the second part, thinking about the manner of our praise.

First of all, then, the God we praise. And I think if we were to draw out three truths about the God we praise. It's from these verses, verses four to nine, and we could summarize the three truths in this way.

And we'll think about each of these in turn. And you'll see how there's a kind of link between them. First of all, we praise the God who is on high. So the God who is on high is the God we praise.

But then also we praise the God who stoops down low. In verse four, it speaks of God exalted over the nations. But then it also describes him as the one who stoops down.

[3 : 29] So we praise the God who is on high. We praise the God who stoops down low. But then also we praise the God who lifts up high. And the psalm also speaks of how God stoops down low in order to lift up to the highest place, those he is helping and aiding.

So these three truths about God that we want to think about this evening. First of all, we praise the God who is on high. Verse four, the Lord is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens.

Who is like the Lord our God, the one who sits enthroned on high. So time and time again in these two verses, the stress is made that our God is on high.

He's exalted, he's above. And in the language that it's used, we could draw a number of truths related to this reality of our God who is on high.

I think one of the things that we can draw out from here is that the God we praise is separate from creation. And verse four, it says that his glory is above the heavens.

[4 : 41] God is not part of this cosmos. He is the creator of it. He is above it. He is outside of it. He involves himself in it, but he's not part of it.

His glory is above the heavens. And even this language also, if we were to draw out something further from that, when it speaks of his glory being above the heavens, it hints at the inexhaustibility, if that's a word, of God's glory.

You know, we use the language of the Bible speaks of the glory of God filling the earth. And that is difficult to get our head around. But here we're being told of glory that is above the heavens, beyond our capacity to visualize or witness.

Such is the extent of God's glory, of God's majesty, of the one who is separate from the cosmos that he has fashioned and molded and governed.

The God who is on high. The God who is on high. But the God who is on high is also the God who exercises authority over the cosmos, over creation, over the nations.

[5 : 52] We read there in verse 4, the Lord is exalted over all the nations. And then verse 5, God is described as the one who sits enthroned on high.

He is the king over all. He enjoys authority and dominion over the universe that he has created, over all the nations of the world.

And when we think of what that means in very practical terms, I think it gives us great comfort to know that this is so. Even though often it doesn't appear to be the case, when we see the chaos that so often envelops the nations of the world, we only need to watch the news and see the headlines.

And we see nations that are in turmoil and seem to be characterized by nothing other than chaos. And yet, here the psalmist reminds us that our God is exalted over all the nations.

He exercises authority over this universe. And even though we can't sometimes understand the manner in which he is doing so, we trust in his wisdom and in his power and in his grace to do so rightly and justly.

[7 : 11] The God who is on high, separate from creation with authority over creation and incomparable to all who would foolishly imagine that they might be his rivals.

Notice the language there in verse 5. Who is like the Lord our God? The psalmist is saying, you know, there are those who imagine that somehow they could challenge our God.

But what foolishness. Who is like the Lord our God? And it's a rhetorical question, but the answer is evident. There is none who is like the Lord our God.

We were reading in Isaiah chapter 40 and how that passage is punctuated time and time again by that question. Who can compare to God?

Who can compare to God? No one can compare to God. This truth is captured intriguingly in some Old Testament names.

[8 : 12] Micaiah. Not to be confused with Micah. Micaiah, he was one of the disciples of Elijah. The meaning of that name, Micaiah, is who is like Yahweh.

Who is like Yahweh? The angel Michael. The name Michael means who is like God. And so even in these names, this reality of the incompatibility of God.

That no one can compare to him. No one can compete with him. No one can challenge him. Some might try. But it's an act of utter folly. Who is like the Lord our God?

The God who is on high overall. Ruling overall. This is the God we praise. The God who is on high.

But also in this psalm, we are presented with the God who stoops down low. And this is maybe the most remarkable aspect of what the psalmist reveals to us about God.

[9 : 16] There in verse 6, we read, Who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth. Now we might ask, well, what is the picture that's being painted here by the psalmist when he describes God as stooping down to look on the heavens and the earth?

And it may be that what the psalmist is doing here, he's continuing on the theme of how high God is. And he is so high that even to look on the heavens and the earth, he needs to stoop down.

He's so far above that in order to see even the heavens involves stooping down for God. That may well be the picture that is being painted here by the writer of the psalm.

But this language of God stooping down is certainly not exhausted by this idea of him looking down on creation. The language of stooping down is developed in a most remarkable way in the verses that follow.

This God who is exalted on high and yet who stoops down. And in verses 7 and 8 we see how he stoops down to the very dust. He raises the poor from the dust.

[10 : 36] But he does so by coming down to raise them. He lifts the needy from the ash heap. So the God who is exalted over all, the God who is governing over the whole universe, yet he is also the God who stoops down.

He stoops down to earth and to the lowest of the low. And why would God do this? And well, that leads us on to the third truth about God, the God whom we praise.

Not only the God who is on high, not only the God who stoops down low, but the God who lifts up high. Notice what is said in verses 7 and 8.

He raises the poor from the dust. He lifts the needy from the ash. He seats them with princes, with the princes of his people. He settles the childless woman in her home as a happy mother of children.

Who does God lift up high? Well, those who are described here, the examples given are of the poor and the needy, the marginalized, the lonely, the hopeless, the despairing.

[11 : 45] They are the object of God's particular care and attention as he stoops down to lift them up from the dust, to lift them up from the ash heap, to lift them up from the deepest and darkest hole in which they find themselves.

But what the psalmist says here, these aren't just the nice words of perhaps a manifesto that says the right things about God.

The very language that the psalmist employs, we're directed to a real life example of God lifting up the humble and the despairing.

There's a coincidence of language that is not coincidental between verse 7 and 8 and verses that we read in 1 Samuel 2.8.

So, if we look up 1 Samuel 2.8, which is the story of Hannah, who was, as we know, childless and who God provided a son to.

[12 : 52] Notice how she expresses herself as it's recorded for us in 1 Samuel 2.8.

If I can find it here. 1 Samuel 2.8. We read as follows. So, this is Hannah's prayer.

And listen to what she says there. He, speaking about God, he raises the poor from the dust. And lifts the needy from the ash heap. He seats them with princes and makes them inherit a throne of honor.

And you'll notice how the manner in which Hannah expresses herself there in her prayer is precisely as the psalmist speaks of God in verses 7 and 8. And so, in that way, there's a sense in which we're being directed to the story of Hannah as an example, a real-life example of God lifting up somebody who was low down, of somebody who was suffering and in pain and in anguish.

So, it's not just nice words. But it's real. It's practical. It's something that God does when he stoops down low to lift up high.

[14 : 11] Now, how has God done that? Well, he's done that time and time again in history. We have that concrete example that the psalm points us to. And we could give so many more examples as they're recorded for us in the Bible.

But, of course, very particularly, God stooped down low in the person of his son Jesus. The incarnation is God stooping down low.

The God who is above the heavens, the God who is enthroned on high, he stooped down low in the person of Jesus.

We think of the language of Paul as he writes to the Philippians where that reality is expressed very eloquently. In Philippians chapter 2 and verses 7 and 8, it says of Jesus, the eternal Son of God, the one exalted on high.

It says of him, he made himself nothing. By taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

[15 : 25] Here we have God stooping low. And stooping low in order to lift up high those who are in the dust, those who are in the ash heap.

In these words of the psalm, we detect something of the great downward and upward sweep of the gospel.

God coming down that we might be lifted up. And that same reality is expressed in what Paul says as he writes to the church in Ephesus.

In Ephesus, or in Ephesians chapter 2 and verses 4 to 6, listen to how Paul expresses the outcome of God's work on our behalf.

In Ephesians chapter 2, reading from verse 4, we read, And then we read, And then we read, And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.

[16 : 39] And Paul goes on. So you have this picture being painted of the God who is on high, the God who is exalted over all, and yet he stoops down low in the person of his Son.

And why does he do that? In order that he might come down to us and lift us up and raise us up to the heavenly places. So you have this wonderful movement from on high to below to then raise up the lights of us.

Jesus stooped down to the lowest place to raise up us to the highest place. This is the God that we are to praise.

The God who is on high, the God who stoops down low, and the God who lifts us up to the highest place. But let's think also just more briefly about the manner of our praise.

And we find that especially in verses 1 to 3. And then we'll pick up a little bit on what is said about God stooping down and raising up. Also, in thinking about the manner of our praise.

- [17 : 49] How are we to praise such a God? It's evident that he's worthy of our praise, given who he is, given that he's exalted on high, given that even though he is so exalted, he was willing to stoop down low, to aid us and to rescue us and to raise us up.

He certainly is worthy of our praise. But how are we to praise him? Well, let's just notice some of what the psalm indicates as the manner of our praise.

I think first of all, it's clear that our praise is personal praise. Notice there in verse 1 it says, Praise the Lord, you his servants, praise the name of the Lord. And when the Bible speaks of the name of the Lord, it's speaking about who he is, his character.

His name represents who he is as a personal God. He has made himself known to us. He has entered into a relationship with us. We know him. We know his name.

We know him. And the praise that we offer is personal praise to a personal God with whom we enjoy a family relationship.

- [18 : 54] We're not presenting sacrifices or ritual to some distant, unknowable God.

But rather we are directing our praise to a living, personal God who is our Father in heaven. So our praise is personal, but it's also permanent or perennial.

It is to be at all times and in every circumstance. There in verse 2 we read, Let the name of the Lord be praised both now and forevermore. Now there's a sense in which that is speaking about the whole sweep of history.

There's never to be a day in the history of this world where praise is not lifted up to the God worthy of praise. But we can maybe think of this also in terms of our own life cycle, every day of our lives.

Now and forevermore that our lives would be characterized by this permanent praise to the God who is worthy of all praise. But this praise of which we form a part or that we offer to God is also to be universal.

- [20 : 02] In verse 3 we read, From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets. Now that picture that's been painted, we might think of it as speaking about time also.

So from early morning to late evening we are to praise God. But I don't think that is what the psalmist particularly has in mind. He has here in mind I think more the idea of across the world.

So when the sun is rising in one part of the world it's setting in another. You think of how of the British Empire it was said, you know, the sun never sets in the British Empire.

That's the kind of idea here. That across the world, in every nation, God is to be praised. And of course for the psalmist to write this at the time that he wrote it, there's a prophetic element in it as he anticipates the nations of the world, the Gentile nations being brought into that worshipping community.

So that in every nation across the world there would be those lifting up their voices in praise to God. This is universal praise that we participate in.

- [21 : 11] And that also brings with it a missionary challenge. If this is to be so, then men and women around the world need to know about this God.

That they might join with us in praising him. And so we need to tell them, we need to share the good news that they would be brought into this worshipping, praising community.

But I want to finish with one final thing about the nature of our praise or the manner of our praise. I think we can draw from the psalm, even if it's not stated so explicitly as these other elements that I mentioned.

I think our praise to God is to be practical. It's to be hands-on. We are to praise God by being like God.

And what are we told about God in this psalm? We're told about God, that he is the God who stoops down in order to lift up. Now if that is what God does, then that is something that we also ought to do.

[22 : 09] In our lives and in our community as a community of believers, this ought to be our concern. Not only to sing praise, which is certainly part of our praise, but in the way in which we live our lives.

In the way in which we serve others. That we would be those who are ready and willing to stoop down in order to raise up. There are so many in the city in which we live who are in need of one kind or another.

Who find themselves, to use the language of the psalm, in the dust or in the ash. Who find themselves marginalized or isolated. Maybe think of that one social reality of our generation.

I think it's been identified quite publicly now as being a core reality. And that is of loneliness and isolation. I was just seeing in the Press and Journal, I think it was yesterday or the day before.

There was an article about a Scottish government initiative. A cross-party initiative to tackle loneliness. And the picture, you may have seen the picture. It was obviously a photo opportunity.

[23 : 22] You may see a photo shoot because you had the leaders or at least prominent members of all the parties. Each holding a placard. And each placard had a word. And together, if you've seen the picture, you can visualize it.

It said, I'm trying to remember what it said. It said, I've got it written down here. We will beat loneliness. I haven't got it written here, but I'm remembering.

I think that's what it was. We will, or together, that's what it was. Together, we will beat loneliness. And so, Nicola Sturgeon was holding one of them. And Willie Rennie. And Patrick Harvey.

And Kessia Dugdale. And then there was a conservative. I don't know who he was. Sorry, but I didn't recognize him. So, they each were holding up this placard.

And, you know, it's a grand sentiment. And I'm not judging them. I'm not questioning their sincerity. I would applaud the concern to make this an issue that needs to be addressed and tackled.

[24 : 25] That's good. But I wonder, and as I say, I don't know the answer to this question. I wonder, you know, what is any of them actually doing to address loneliness of real people, of actual people who are isolated or lonely?

I don't know. I don't know. But what I do know is that if we are to praise God by being like God, then we need to be those willing to stoop down in order to raise up.

And it's interesting, in the examples that are given in the psalm of men and women being raised up, they're raised up to be part of something, to be part of a family, to be part of a community, to be part of a people.

And so in each case, there's this movement, not only from disgrace to glory, but from isolation to community, from loneliness to friendship.

And this is what God is doing for those who are laid low. And if we are to praise God in a practical way, then we are to be like Him in seeking to do the same and to reflect His concerns and His ministry in our favor.

[25 : 36] Our praise to the God who is worthy of all praise. He is, after all, the God who is lifted up on high. He is, after all, the God who was willing to stoop down to save us.

He is, after all, the God who has lifted us up to heavenly places, to such a God. The praise we offer cannot only be words, but our praise must incorporate Jesus-like service to others.

And may God help us so to praise Him. Hallelujah. Praise the Lord. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word.

We thank You for who You are. We thank You that You are the God who is exalted on high. That You sit enthroned in heaven. That Your glory is far above the heavens.

You are the altogether powerful God, the creator of the universe. The one who is involved in our world, but who stands apart from it.

[26 : 39] We thank You for the wonderful way in which You have done so in and through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

The eternal Son of God. The one who had enjoyed perfect bliss and communion with You, willing to make Himself as nothing.

To take the form of a servant and to come into this world to stoop down low to save the likes of us. We thank You for that glorious movement of the gospel of God who stoopes down low in order to raise us up high.

And as we profit from that, as we benefit from that, as we are the beneficiaries of this saving initiative, we do pray that our grateful response would be to seek to be like our God.

To seek to be like You. And that in our lives, our concern would be to stoop down low in order to raise up high. And we pray these things in Jesus' name.

[27 : 58] Amen.