

Lesson 20: I can't praise you if I'm dead!

Memory verse: Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do those who are dead rise up and praise you? (Psalm 88:10)

Several times in the Psalms we find the argument from the memory verse used. "God, please don't let me die. I won't be able to praise you if I'm dead." But that raises a question. Does God need humans to praise him? Doesn't he have a large group of angels who do that?

As I looked:
thrones were set in place
and the Ancient of Days took his seat.
His clothing was as white as snow;
the hair of his head was white like wool.
His throne was flaming with fire,
and its wheels were all ablaze.
A river of fire was blowing,
coming out from before him.
Thousands upon thousands attended him;
ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.
The court was seated,
and the books were opened. (Daniel 7:9, 10)

Written mathematically the second line of the next to last couplet looks like this:

$$\begin{array}{r} 10,000 \\ \times 10,000 \\ \hline = 100,000,000 \end{array}$$

That's one hundred million! Do you think it would make much difference to God if just one human weren't around to praise him? And yet the psalmists used that argument more than once.

Turn, O LORD, and deliver me;
save me because of your unfailing love.
No one remembers you when he is dead.
Who praises you from the grave? (Psalm 6:4, 5)

The highest heavens belong to the LORD,
but the earth he has given to man.
It is not the dead who praise the LORD,
those who go down to silence;
it is we who extol the LORD,
both now and forevermore.
Praise the LORD. (Psalm 115:16-18)

Not only that, but the Psalms are full of commands to praise God. Take, for example, the shortest of them all.

Praise the LORD, all you nations;
extol him, all you peoples.
For great is his love toward us.

and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.
Praise the LORD. (Psalm 117)

Here's a good place to mention the difference between translation and transliteration. When you translate something, you say in one language what was said in a different language. "Buenos Dias" in Spanish becomes "Good day" in English. When you transliterate something you use the letters of a different language to reproduce the sound of the word in the original language.

Bible translators normally transliterate people's names. So we say "Elijah," for the name of the prophet of Israel when the name would translate to "My God is Yahweh." The Hebrew for "Praise the LORD" is transliterated as "Hallelu Yah" and is often spelled as one word, "Hallelujah." That's the Hebrew used in Psalm 117. So when someone uses that word they're issuing a call for people to praise the Creator God.

We've already made the point that there are literally millions of angels around to praise God in Heaven. Shouldn't that be enough? Is God so selfish that he can't get enough praise, even from so many angels? When we recall that love and selfishness are opposites and that God is love, then that can't be the case. So why are the Psalms so full of calls for us to praise God?

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:17, 18)

There it is! The law of worship. We humans become like that which we uphold as good and right. If we put God in that place and worship [worth-ship] him, we will become like him. If we put a false picture of God in that place and worship it, we will become like that false God, with all the evil inherent in the lie we believe. No one and no thing in the universe could provide us with a trustworthy model for our own lives except for God. So, to promote our own well-being, God calls us to worship and praise him.

Praise the LORD.
Praise, O servants of the LORD,
Praise the name of the LORD.
Let the name of the LORD be praised,
both now and forevermore.
From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets
the name of the LORD is to be praised.
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,
who stoops down to look
on the heavens and the earth?
He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes,
with the princes of their people.
He settles the barren woman in her home
as a happy mother of children.
Praise the LORD. (Psalm 113)

This Psalm not only calls on us to praise God, but gives us an idea what aspects of his character we are to focus on and thus become like. He is the God who lifts up those the world has left behind; the people we are often taught to despise, often not because of choices they made but because of the situation into which they were born or into which they fell when they were essentially powerless.

Praise be the the Lord, to God our Savior,
who daily bears our burdens.
Our God is a God who saves;
from the Sovereign LORD comes escape from death. (Psalm 68:19, 20)

Shout with joy to God, all the earth!
Sing to the glory of his name;
offer him glory and praise!
Say to God; "How awesome are your deeds!
So great is your power
that your enemies cringe before you.
All the earth bows down to you;
they sing praise to you,
they sing praise to your name." (Psalm 66:1-4)

The second quotation above may seem counter-intuitive. Normally when we encounter something or someone very powerful we tend to be afraid. Imagine meeting a six-foot, five-inch tall man with well defined muscles on a dark street. If he sounded the least bit grouchy you'd probably turn and run. And yet we are called to be glad because of the great power of God.

Clearly, we are to understand God's power in a sense that we trust him not to use that power against us. We are not to be afraid of that power. Indeed, we are to consider that power a form of protection from the things we have good reason to be afraid of, like tall, strong, grouchy strangers.

So the call to praise God is a call to admire the only one pure enough to be followed as an example. And in Jesus we find the only human whose example we can safely follow. Once we know that we become like that which we worship, the call to worship God and praise him makes a lot of sense.

Possible thought papers:

1. Why would it be a problem if a human demanded to be praised? Can you think of examples? What would that do to the person being praised?
2. What is the difference between the praise and worship we give to God and the praise we give to someone who has done a good job at something?
3. Use an English poetic form to tell why you think God is so wonderful.