

WHO IS LIKE THE LORD OUR GOD? Psalm 113

Psalm 113 is the first of a series of psalms called the EGYPTIAN HALLEL. *Hallel* means, “praise.” Psalms 113-118 are hymns of praise to God. It is called the EGYPTIAN HALLEL because of the reference to the Exodus in Psalm 114:1. And this collection of psalms was sung during Jewish holy days, especially the Passover. Psalms 113 and 114 were sung before the Passover meal. Psalms 115 through 118 were sung after the meal. Jesus and his disciples most likely sung these six psalms at the Last Supper the night he was betrayed.

The EGYPTIAN HALLEL begins with Psalm 113. We do not know the author, background, or occasion of this psalm. But the message is unmistakably clear. God is worthy to be praised. So clear is this message that a theology of praise can be developed from this psalm. First of all, this psalm teaches that praise is essential to worship. Worship is more than praise. But is it worship without praise? A worship service may consist of singing, scripture reading, prayer, preaching, giving, baptism, and the Lord’s Table. But the fact that you are in a worship service does not make you a worshiper. A worship service without true praise is a sit-in. It is a protest disguised as worship. True worship involves passionate praise.

This psalm also teaches that praise is *God-centered*. It is not about us. It is about God. God is the target-audience in Christian worship. He is the subject and object of our praise. Romans 11:36 says, “*For from him and to him and through him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.*” Praise is not a means of getting what you want from God. It is the means by which God receives the glory he demands, desires, and deserves. Psalm 113 exhorts us to offer God-exalting praise. And it tells us why God is worthy to be praised. Verse 5 asks: “*Who is like the Lord our God?*” Answer: Nobody. There is no one like the Lord our God! Psalm 113 teaches us what it means to praise God and why we should praise the Lord.

I. THE CALL TO PRAISE

Psalm 113 begins with a call to praise: “*Praise the Lord!*” This sentence is one word in Hebrew. *Hallel* means, “praise.” “*Yah*” is God’s name, Yahweh, contracted. *Hallel Yah* is transliterated hallelujah. It is an exclamation of praise to God. It is also an exhortation to praise God. The first line of this psalm says, “*Praise the Lord.*” And the last line of this psalm says, “*Praise the Lord.*” The call to praise is the ALPHA and OMEGA of this psalm. It is the bookends that hold up the message of the psalm. God is worthy to be praised. Verses 1-3 declare that the Lord is worthy to be praised by all people at all times in all places.

A. THE LORD IS TO BE PRAISED BY ALL PEOPLE.

There are three calls to praise in verse 1. There is the opening call: “*Praise the Lord!*” Speaking to an unidentified audience, the psalmist commands everyone to

praise the Lord. It is a call to one and all. AUGUSTINE said: "Man's chief work is the praise of God." There is no higher call than this. Psalm 150:5a says: *"Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!"* Verse 1 begins with a call to praise. The call is then repeated in a double imperative: *"Praise, O servants of the Lord, praise the name of the Lord!"* The object of praise is mentioned three times in this verse: *the Lord*. It is as if each member of the Godhead is honored here: FATHER, SON, and HOLY SPIRIT.

Who should offer praise to the Lord? Verse 1 says, *"Praise, O servants of the Lord."* The *servants of the Lord* may be the priests and Levites. But it probably refers to all the people of God. In Egypt, the children of Israel were the slaves of Pharaoh. But God redeemed them and they became servants of the Lord. So it is with all who are redeemed by the blood and righteousness of Christ. We are servants of the Lord. It is our privilege to belong to him and our duty to obey him. One of our basic duties is to praise the name of the Lord. Who do you serve? In Matthew 16:25, Jesus says, *"For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."* To live for self is to lose it all. But true life is found when you give it away for Jesus. Some fear this will cost something radical like becoming a foreign missionary in a dangerous place. But the cost is more radical than that! To be a servant of the Lord is to live to praise the Lord!

B. THE LORD IS TO BE PRAISED AT ALL TIMES.

Verse 1 calls us to praise the Lord three times. Verse 2 is another call using different language: *"Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth and forevermore!"* God blesses us by what he does for us. We bless God by what we say about him. It is grateful praise for divine favor. Psalm 103:1 says, *"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!"* If Israel blessed the Lord for the Passover, how much more should we bless him for the divine intervention that took place on Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter! Ephesians 1:3 says: *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."* In Christ we should praise God presently and perpetually.

PRAISE GOD PRESENTLY. Jesus and the disciples most likely sung Psalm 113 during THE LAST SUPPER. Knowing he would die on the cross the next day, Jesus announced he was going away. He predicted one of the disciples would betray him. And he instituted the Lord's Supper by which they were to remember him in the bread and cup. Yet Jesus and the disciples sang hymns of praise to God that night. And the first hymn they sung would have been Psalm 113, in which verse 2 says: *"Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth."* Jesus blessed the name of the Lord at this critical hour. Likewise, our praise should not be limited to good days, favorable circumstances, or fruitful seasons. We should praise the Lord at all times. More specifically, we should praise God right now. This is what the phrase *"from this time forth"* means. It speaks in real time. No matter what is going on in your life, now is still a good time to praise the Lord. Psalm 34:1 says: *"I will bless the Lord at all times, his praise shall continually be in my mouth."*

PRAISE GOD PERPETUALLY. God is to be praised in the midst of and in spite of your present circumstances. But God is also to be praised as you face the future. No one knows what tomorrow holds. Family, health, and success may abandon you tomorrow. How should you respond to this uncertain reality? Matthew 6:34 tells us what not to do: *“Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”* Psalm 113:2 tells us what to do: *“Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth and forevermore.”*

This verse assumes the doctrine of eternal security. Eternal security means those who are saved are saved forever. Eternal life by definition is life eternal. Verse 2 assumes this and calls us to bless the Lord forevermore. To bless God forevermore is to live forevermore. THE WESTMINSTER SHORTER CATECHISM teaches: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.” Will heaven be boring? Heaven is only boring to those who find God boring. Ad there is a place for those who find the glory of God boring. It is called Hell. But heaven is the reward for those who live to glorify God and enjoy him forever. We praise God as a dress rehearsal for heaven. Psalm 41:13 says, *“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and amen.”*

**WHEN WE’VE BEEN THERE TEN THOUSAND YEARS
BRIGHT SHINING AS THE SUN
WE NO LESS DAY TO SING GOD’S PRAISE
THEN WHEN WE FIRST BEGUN**

C. THE LORD IS TO BE PRAISED IN ALL PLACES.

Verse 1 tells us who should praise the Lord. Verse 2 tells us when the Lord should be praised. And verse 3 tells us where the Lord should be praised: *“From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the Lord is to be praised!”* This is the third mention of *the name of the Lord* in this psalm. In scripture, a name is more than a means of identification. A person’s name represented his nature or character. So it is with the name of the Lord. God’s name is the revelation of his attributes. It represents who he is and what he has accomplished. The Lord’s name is so great that it should be praised from the rising of the sun to its setting.

This may be read as a reference to time. If so, it repeats the point of verse 2, the Lord is to be praised at all times. Indeed, God is worthy to be praised from the first moments of consciousness in the morning to the last slumbering thoughts before you fall asleep at night. But it is more accurate to read this verse as a reference to space, not time. It is the geography of praise. From the place where the sun rises to the place where the sun goes down, the name of the Lord is to be praised. From east to west, the name of the Lord is to be praised. Wherever you are, the name of the Lord is to be praised. Malachi 1:11 says, *“For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts.”*

II. THE CAUSE FOR PRAISE

The structure of Psalm 113 is simple. Verses 1-3 issue a call to praise the Lord to all people at all times in all places. Verses 4-9 explain why the Lord is to be praised. Those who know and love the Lord easily find many reasons to praise the Lord. But Psalm 113 gives one compelling reason to offer praise. The Lord is incomparable. There is no one like him. The psalmist makes this point by pointing in two directions: up and down. No one is high enough to reach God. No one is so low that God cannot reach him or her. God is a God of exalted majesty and condescending mercy.

A. GOD'S EXALTED MAJESTY.

Verses 4-6 celebrate God's exalted majesty by focusing on the transcendence and incomparability of God.

GOD IS TRANSCEDENT. Transcendence means God is above and beyond us. His being is infinite, his character is holy, his power is omnipotent. We are not on God's level. The essence of transcendence is stated in the first four words of verse 4 says: *"The Lord is high."* The rest of the verse states the extent of divine transcendence: *"The Lord is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens!"* First, the transcendence of God is seen in relationship to the *nations*. Israel was not a super-power. It was a small country surrounded by stronger enemy nations. And it was constantly under the threat of attack. The military victories Israel won were not because of their king or army or weapons. It was because the Lord is high above all nations. In the ancient Near East, the nations claimed allegiance to territorial deities. Each nation has its own set of gods. And the nations expected their gods to give victory over their enemies. Israel only had one God. Yet it could say of its God, *"The Lord is high above all nations."*

The transcendence of God is also seen in relationship to the *heavens*. Verse 4 says: *"The Lord is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens."* The glory of the Lord is the sum total of his divine attributes. THOMAS WATSON wrote: "Glory is essential to the Godhead, as light is to the sun. Glory is the sparkling of his Deity." God is glorious. And his glory is not just high above the nations. It is infinitely higher than the heavens. W. GRAHAM SCROGGIE commented here: "Heaven is lower to him than it is high to us." No earthly rulers or cosmic powers can compare to the greatness of our God. Psalm 8:1 says, *"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens."*

GOD IS INCOMPARABLE. Verse 5 asks, *"Who is like the Lord our God?"* This question is the heart of this psalm. It is a rhetorical question that assumes a negative answer. Exodus 15:11 asks, *"Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?"* The question answers itself. The Lord our God is incomparable. There is no one like him. He is wholly other, totally unique, absolutely one of a kind. The incomparability of God is seen in the contrast between where he sits and what he sees.

God sits in heaven. Verse 4 tells us where the Lord is: *high*. Verse 5 tells us what the Lord is doing on high: *“Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high.”* He is not seated to rest. He is seated to rule. And God does not play musical chairs. He alone is permanently seated on the throne of the universe. Psalm 103:19 says, *“The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.”*

God sees on earth. The greater a person becomes the more inaccessible he or she tends to become. Sometimes that greatness is self-perception, not actual reality. Yet vainglory can still cause one to become aloof, indifferent, and uncaring. The Lord is incomparably great. Yet verse 6 tells us that the God who is seated on high is one *“who looks far down on the heavens and the earth.”* The verb used here suggests being of low estate. But how can the God who is seated on high be of low estate. The NKJV says God *“humbles himself to behold the things that are in the heavens and in the earth.”* The NIV says God *“stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth.”* Thank God for stooping grace! This is what the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ is all about. John 1:14 says: *“And the Word became flesh, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*

B. GOD’S CONDESCENDING MERCY.

Verses 7-9 let us know that God does not look down in passive observation. God looks down with condescending mercy. What he sees moves him to act in what WALTER BRUEGGEMANN calls *“transformative intervention.”*

GOD INTERVENES FOR THE POOR AND THE NEEDY. Verse 7 says, *“He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap.”* The *poor* are those who lack financial and material resources. They have no money to get what they need. The *needy* are those suffering the consequences of being poor. They are forced to live without the necessities of life. But God cares about these lowly individuals. In fact, the poor and needy are more than individuals. This is a class-action suit. God is on the side of the poor and the needy. The poor sit in the dirt. But the Lord raises the poor from the dust. The needy live on garbage thrown on the city dump. But the Lord lifts the needy from the ash heap.

God often does this by means, not miracles. Psalm 112 blesses the righteous man who gives to the poor. You cannot be righteous without a heart of compassion that moves you to help the poor and needy. But Psalm 113 is not about our duty to the poor. It is about God’s merciful condescension that intervenes for the poor and the needy. Why does God intervene for the poor and the needy? Verse 8 says: *“To make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people.”* In 1 Samuel 2:7-8, Hannah sings, *“The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord and on them he has set the world.”* Only God can do this. Only God would do this. Only God is worthy to be praised.

GOD INTERVENES FOR THE BARREN WOMAN. Verse 9 says: *“He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children.”* Verses 7-8 illustrate God’s

concern for society. Verse 9 illustrates God's care for the family. In the ancient world, a woman's status and security were based on her ability to bear children. Barrenness was a tragedy, disgrace, and curse among Jewish women. A barren woman was considered to be without joy, provision, or significance. Yet the Lord intervenes and "*gives the barren woman a home.*" He gives her a husband and a family and a house, "*making her the joyous mother of children.*" In the Old Testament, the Lord did this for Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, and others. Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel are especially significant in that by making these barren women mothers God kept his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the New Testament, a barren woman named Elizabeth became pregnant with a son named John. Some months later, her virgin cousin, Mary, who was also with child, visited her. When Mary arrived, the baby in her womb leaped for joy. And this should be our response!

God is worthy to be praised because he raises up the poor and needy to sit with princes and makes the barren woman the mother of children. God does not promote all the poor and needy to seats of honor. And God does not cause every barren woman to bear children. But though God does not always do it literally; he always does it spiritually. This is what it means to be saved. We were poor and needy. But God raised lifted us from the ash heaps and made us to sit in heavenly places with Christ. We were barren. But the Lord has given us a new home in Christ and makes us fruitful for his glory. Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead for all who are poor and needy and barren.

In verses 4-9, the psalmist makes his case that the Lord is worthy to be praised. So he concludes the psalm the way it began. The last line of verse 9 issues a final call to worship: "*Praise the Lord!*" When you think of this incomparable God who sits high and looks low, praise is the only appropriate response. ROBERT DAVIDSON concludes his commentary on this psalm by saying, "If this cannot move us to praise, nothing will." What does it take to get you to praise the Lord? Jesus healed ten lepers. But when they saw they were healed, nine continued on their way. But one returned to give thanks and praise to God. Which category do you fall into? Are you one of the nine? Or are you the one who returns to give praise to God?

**HOW CAN I SAY THANKS FOR THE THINGS YOU HAVE DONE FOR ME?
THINGS SO UNDESERVED, YET YOU GAVE TO PROVE YOUR LOVE FOR ME
THE VOICES OF A MILLION ANGLES COULD NOT EXPRESS MY GRATITUDE
ALL THAT I AM AND EVER HOPE TO BE, I OWE IT ALL TO THEE**

**TO GOD BE THE GLORY, TO GOD BE THE GLORY
TO GOD BE THE GLORY FOR THE THINGS HE HAS DONE**

**JUS LET ME LIVE MY LIFE, LET IT BE PLEASING, LORD TO THEE
AND IF I GAIN ANY PRAISE, LET IT GO TO CALVARY
WITH HIS BLOOD HE HAS SAVED ME, WITH HIS POWER HE HAS RAISED ME
TO GOD BE THE GLORY FOR THE THINGS HE HAS DONE.**