

## **PRAISING GOD IS MORE THAN ENTERTAINMENT!**

**Today's Text: Psalms 145-150**

**Extracts:**

1. *The Lord is near to all who call upon Him ...in truth....The Lord preserves all who love Him....My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord, and all flesh shall bless His holy name forever and ever [Ps. 145: 18,20,21]*
2. *The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His mercy. Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion! For He has strengthened the bars of your gates; He has blessed your children within you [Ps. 147: 11-13]*
3. *Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet, ... with the lute and harp...with the timbrel and dance,... with stringed instruments and flutes,... with loud cymbals; praise Him with clashing cymbals! [Ps. 150: 3-5]*

*In **Sister Act 2: Back in the Habit** (1993), a Las Vegas show girl (who had faked being a nun in **Sister Act**, 1992, to be protected from her life-threatening ex-lover), was invited back to the habit as Sister Mary Clarence to teach music in a San Francisco inner city high school that was on the verge of being closed down. She soon discovered that, although the school had a rich heritage in music, the rowdy students lacked self-confidence. While working on turning the group into a choir, she entered them in an All State Music Competition in Hollywood. Should they win, their school could stay open. On the day of the competition, the young choir was intimidated by the shining choir gowns and the melodious songs rendered by the better- equipped schools. When it was their turn to sing, Sister Clarence asked them to simply be themselves. They threw away their choir gowns and rendered the popular tunes, "Joyful Lord," and "O Happy Day," in contemporary (rap) music style. They won the competition!*

*Why did they win? I have no idea of the criteria used by the judges. However, having watched the movie, I believe that their victory was not because of the **quality of their music** but **the honesty of their words**. Those children came from poor neighbourhoods. They had seen their lives transformed through the ministry of Sister Clarence. They had become disciplined, more self-assured and more God fearing. Therefore, when they sang songs of praise, they were actually verbalizing what was in their hearts. They were teaching us that praising God is much more than entertainment. That is the subject that we shall examine in today's lesson.*

## 1. Praise or entertainment?

In the dictionary, praise has several meanings. However, for our purpose, praise means to *glorify* God by homage and ascription of perfections *especially in songs*. Because praise is closely associated with songs, we have come to equate one with the other. We have come to believe that once a group of worshippers gathers and begins to render praise songs, then it must be praising God! Is that really true?

Let us consider a simple example. Imagine that the majority of the members of a church refuse to pay tithes, offer thanks or redeem pledges, even though they all earn decent incomes. The pastor raises the song of praise, “I surrender all!” and the whole congregation responds with music, dance and enthusiasm. Would you regard that as praising God? I doubt. Have they really surrendered all to Jesus when they are withholding their tithes and offerings? God says we are robbers if we refuse to pay tithes and offerings [Mal. 3: 8-9], and “the Lord is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous” [Prov. 15: 29]. The word of God says, “whoever offers praise glorifies Me; and to him who orders his conduct aright I will show the salvation of God” [Ps. 50: 23]. Therefore, praise does not begin with the singing but with our total relationship with God!

That point is reinforced when we examine the various ways by which we can glorify God (apart from praise). Let us consider the following:

### a) *Fruitfulness*

In His last discourse before His crucifixion, Jesus told His disciples, “by this My Father is glorified, *that you bear much fruit*” [Jn 15: 8]. Those who live in the flesh bear the carnal fruits of immorality, wickedness and blasphemy, among other sins [Gal. 5: 17-21]. On the other hand, believers who are Spirit-led bear the fruits of love, joy, peace, endurance, kindness and faithfulness, among other virtues [vv. 22-23]. *Only worshippers who are Spirit-led can praise God*. The rest are in a concert, entertaining themselves or others!

### b) *Service*

Writing to the elect of God (of which we claim to belong!), Peter said, “if anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things, *God may be glorified* through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and dominion for ever and ever” [1 Pet. 4: 11]. Service implies selflessness and humility. It implies putting God first in all that we do. If we do not see praise in terms of service to God, but more as a business venture for which we get paid, the likelihood is that we are parading or showing off our singing or musical talents instead of glorifying God.

### c) *Suffering*

When people receive blessings and success, the likelihood is that they may be very disposed to praise God. Let suffering or trials come and the blame game begins. However, it takes suffering to really know those who put God first in their lives for “if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, *but let him glorify God in this manner*” [1 Pet. 4: 16].

Following false allegations against them, Paul and Silas were beaten and imprisoned at Philippi. Their feet were fastened to the stocks such that they could not move. At midnight, “Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.” God responded with an earthquake that shook the foundations of the prison and the prisoners’ chains fell off! [Acts 16: 16-26]. God responded to their praise because they had glorified Him with their suffering.

We all like good music. We all like to be praised, somehow. However, we also listen to the lyrics! In the words of Richard De Haan, “hearts in tune with God will sing His praises.”<sup>1</sup> God looks at our hearts when we praise Him. He does not lack praise because there are trillions of angels and saints in heaven who can do better than we can offer [Rev. 7: 9-12]. He is praised from one generation to another [Ps. 145: 4], and from sunrise to sunset [Mal. 1: 11]. Everything that has breath can praise Him [Ps. 150: 6]. Therefore, the little that we can contribute should bless, not hurt us. That is why we need to know how to praise God the right way. Psalms 145-50 give us excellent clues.

## 2. The practice of praise

As we study those psalms closely, we can obtain answers to some frequently asked questions. Here are some of them:

### a) *The subject and object of praise*

In the days of Elijah, the northern kingdom of Israel worshipped Baal, an idol. During the contest between Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal, the latter worshipped and prayed to their god, saying, “O Baal, hear us!” Elijah, on the other hand, prayed to the Almighty God who answered him by fire from heaven. Then the idol worshippers all fell to the ground and acknowledged Elijah’s God, saying, “The Lord, He is God!” [1 Kgs 18: 20-40].

People praise who or what they hold in high esteem. As we saw in the above example, idol worshippers praise idols, atheists praise themselves. However, the true test comes in the long run. When an atheist faces a plane crash, s(he) will remember God! When an idol cannot save, its worshipper will have to appeal to a higher authority.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Our Daily Bread*, July 11, 2004, 2004 Annual Gift Edition

According to the psalms that we are studying, our ever-living God is the subject and object of our praise for the following reasons:

□ For His graciousness

His greatness is unsearchable [**Ps. 145: 3**]. His acts are mighty [**Ps. 150: 2**]. He is slow to anger and great in mercy [**Ps. 145: 8**]. He upholds all who fall [**v. 14**]. He is near to all who call upon Him in truth [**v. 18**], and He preserves all who love Him [**v. 20**]. That is why “all flesh shall bless His holy name forever and ever” [**v. 21**].

□ For His help

Our God is so meticulous that “He counts the number of the stars; He calls them all by name” [**Ps. 146: 4**]. Consequently, He knows our individual needs- hunger, justice and freedom [**v. 7**], healing of our diseases and lifting of our spirits [**v. 8**], and caring for the strangers, the widowed and the fatherless [**v. 9**].

□ He is Lord of all creation

He made all things. He controls all the heavenly bodies and seasons, such that the hills and mountains, trees, beasts, kings and princes, old people and children receive their nourishing [**Ps. 148: 1-12**]. We owe Him praise because “His glory is above the earth and heaven” [**v. 13**].

□ We are His children

Since we are members of “the assembly of the saints” that have recognized God as “their Maker” and “their King,” we have every reason to praise Him with dance or instruments (like the timbrel and harp) or sing aloud on our beds and with our mouths [**Ps. 149: 1-6**]. He will avenge all the wrongs against us [**vv. 7-9**]. Therefore, to praise Him is an honour that all His saints will enjoy [**v. 9**].

b) *How to praise God*

Cultural and denominational rules influence the way that we praise God. For example, some people hold the view that reverence in the presence of God calls for disciplined conduct. Some others claim free expression as the Holy Spirit moves them. Some people resent shouting into the microphone since God is not deaf! Others do not see why they should not since God is not nervous either!

We recall that when David went to bring the ark of the Lord from the home of Obed-Edom, he “danced with all his might.” However, his wife, Michal, Saul’s daughter, was not happy. When David returned home, she said to him sarcastically, “How glorious was the king of Israel today, *uncovering himself today in the eyes of the maids of his servants, as one of the base fellows shamelessly uncovers himself!*” David replied, “It was *before the Lord who chose me* instead of your father and all his house, to appoint me ruler over Israel. *Therefore, I will play music before the Lord*” [2 Sam. 6: 11-21]. Here lies the key to knowing how to praise God. Michal paid attention to cultural decency while her husband looked at it from a spiritual perspective, that is, how to glorify God through praise. His answer is straightforward: “I will play music before the Lord.”

As revealed in the five psalms under study, the following ways/means of praise were already well established in Old Testament times and are still valid for the modern church:

□ *Singing*

Songs are used in most churches, and the psalmist says, “Sing to the Lord a new song and His praise in the assembly of saints” [Ps. 149: 1]. There are solemn songs (those used during formal worship, especially in orthodox churches) and chorus songs (those used at prayer meetings and revivals). In recent times, there has been a tremendous growth in the latter set of songs.

Songs are in most cases accompanied with instruments, the commonest in the modern church being the piano, the guitar and drums. The psalms listed timbrel and harp [Ps. 149:3], the trumpet, the flute, stringed instruments and cymbals [Ps. 150: 3,4,5].

□ *Dancing*

When praise singers are moved, they can dance too! We are not talking of just raising hands and waving them from side to side. David danced. After miraculously crossing the Red Sea, the sister of Moses, Miriam, “took the timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out with her with timbrels and dances” [Ex. 15: 20]. When you attend African churches or African-American churches in the United States, you will sweat from real dancing. It is spontaneous and infectious!

c) *Where to praise God*

Since everything that has breath should praise God [Ps. 150: 6], the earth and its fullness and inhabitants are His [Ps. 24: 1], and the firmament

shows His handiwork [Ps. 19: 1], then God is to be praised *everywhere continually* [Ps. 145: 21]. The psalmist also says, “Seven times a day I praise You because of Your righteousness” [Ps. 119: 164]. Since believers are to rejoice always, pray without ceasing and give thanks in everything [1 Thes. 5: 16-18], then, by definition, we ought to praise God *at all times*.

### 3. Conclusion

Praise, as we have seen above, is best expressed through music. Music is good for our spirits and God loves good music [2 Chron. 5: 13-14]. However, music *as praise* goes beyond entertainment. Whether it is acceptable to God does not depend on the quality of the melody but on the state of relationship between God and the praise singers for “God is Spirit and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” [Jn 4: 24].

Do you want your praise to be acceptable to God *as well as* benefit you? Do the following:

- a) Repair your relationship with God through His Son, Jesus Christ. You can do that by confessing your sins, paying your tithes and honouring your vows. Strive to live holy from now on.
- b) Make thanksgiving your way of life. In other words, graduate from thanksgiving to “thanks living.” One way to practise that is to offer thanks at every worship service that you attend, not just sowing a seed only when you want something from God.
- c) Praise God in every circumstance in which you find yourself, not only when you receive blessings and success. What you may see as failure may be God’s way to save your life or from worse danger.

Next time you catch yourself singing your favourite song of praise, ask yourself, “Am I praising God or entertaining myself?”