

TYPES OF PRAYER

The Power of Praise and Lament

One of the criticisms of church services is that it can appear not to be authentic. A person enters and sees people praising God, with songs of praise for God's victory. And looking around they think; "These people are not real." There are Scriptures that seem to affirm that we should always praise God. Ps 34:1 Ps 75:9 Hebrew 13:15

In all things we are to praise God. Praise is an act of sacrifice, that we do regardless of how we feel. God deserves praise because no matter what happens he is on the throne. And there is a powerful truth to this.

But the Bible also affirms another way to deal with hardship. One third of the Psalms are ones of lament. When we worship God there are two things in the room. There is Father, son and Holy Spirit. There is also disease and depression and suffering and divorce and pain and unemployment. *"If a theology of resurrection (the empty tomb, renewal, personal transformation, healing, miracles) does not stand together in worship with a theology of suffering (the full cross, intercession, trouble, sorrow, struggle), then I contend our worship is out of accord with both the Scriptures and the daily news."* Ed Gentry.

Jesus teaches us the the kingdom of God is here and yet and not fully come.. Worship should reflect this. The Bible teaches that because of the resurrection all things are being made new. We are a people of praise, thanks, and joy. But we are also a people of suffering. People around the world are dying of war and starvation, including our brothers and sisters in Ukraine right now. You and I struggle with relationships and job and our emotional and physical health. Jesus said we will have trouble.

So, praise and lament must stand together in worship. In worship we proclaim God goodness and power and majesty. We praise him for his faithfulness and love and grace. But this is not always what we experience. God can seem a

long way away. Bad things happen to us and those we love. So how do we reconcile these? We can praise God as an act of faith and the Bible endorses this.

But equally the Bible affirms prayers of laments. The lament psalms are prayers where a person cries out to God about the gap between God and what they are experiencing. But in our worship repertoire we have no such songs. They are all of praise and thanks. Psalms of lament recognize the reality of pain without answers, the apparent unfairness of God, the apparent absence of God. They express doubt as well as faith. They share disappointment with God.

And so, if a person comes to a church service and there is no place for pain and lament, then they feel further isolated. Pain has that effect anyway but then they come to church and think that everyone else seems happy and has no pain in their life and so they feel totally alone.

I think we have to find room in our services for lament because that is incredibly healing and affirmative to those who are experiencing pain.

Lament also leads us to mission. If it is not ok to bring issues of pain and suffering and injustice to God then maybe they should just be ignored. But if we do acknowledge them it leads to intercession. "God, how long before your kingdom come?" It leads us to get involved in this world.

So, lament and praise should not be separated. Praise without lament leads to a superficial spirituality, an inauthentic spirituality that does not recognize or take seriously the pain and grief of our world, and our lives. But lament without praise can lead to self-pity and eventually unbelief because we forget who God is and what his character is and we forget about the hope we have in the resurrection.

Praise brings heaven to earth; lament brings earth before heaven.

The second issue around praise is one that many younger people are asking these days. Why does God need to be praised and command us to praise him? Is God a narcissist? I realize even raising this question is heretical to some. But people today are asking this question. What kind of God demands to be praised all the time? It is valid to ask.

We don't like people who blow their own trumpet all the time, and people who are wanting to be loved all the time are seen as needy. So why does this not apply to God?

Why does God want our praise and worship?

He alone is worthy. He is God and we are not. He is glorious there is nothing and no one else like him. It natural to praise what is good. CS Lewis pointed this out years ago. If we see a great sunset we want to tell someone. If we hear a great performance we want to clap. If we see something of beauty we want to share it with others.

God wants—but doesn't need—our praise. God does not need our praise in order to shore up his ego. He is perfect with or without us.

It is to our benefit that we give glory to God We were created as worshipping beings. To give glory in the right place is to fulfil one of the very basic aspects of what it means to be human.

It is to our detriment that we give glory to the wrong god. Romans 1:25 We all give glory and worship something. The daily battle is if we are going to give glory to God or to something else. When we worship something other than God we pay the price for that. We are never satisfied.

The power of praise and lament

It takes the focus off ourselves. We are deeply and inherently self-centred. Life in a culture that encourages self-centred ness. I am the God of the age. What I want and think and feel is No 1. (as long as it doesn't hurt someone else too much)

It reminds us that God is greater than our problems. Problems have a habit of getting bigger. We worry about them and get anxious. But when we praise God we are acknowledging that he is bigger. He is Almighty God. Psalm 121:1-2

It reminds me of truth of who I am. I am loved by God I am chosen by him. I am not a random nobody. I need reminded of this, and praise does that by declaring God's love and grace. Psalm 139:16-18

It pushes back to enemy. Praise can be a spiritual weapon that defeats the schemes of the enemy. 2 Chron 20. King Jehoshaphat is faced with a huge army. His tactic is to seek the Lord in prayer and then send the worship team out ahead of the army. This is not a strategy that many army generals would approve of. The worship team are not trained for battle. They are not armed. They are good at singing and playing music. That is their skill set. That is why they are in the music team and not the army. What Jehoshaphat was doing was declaring his trust and faith in God to win the battle. We read that the enemy was thrown into total confusion. They turned on themselves and killed each other. The army just went and collected all the loot. Praise is a powerful weapon in the spiritual realm. Paul says the weapons we fight with are not of this world. 2 Corinthians 10:4 Spiritual battles need spiritual weapons.

It can lift our spirits. Praise can alter our mood. Not claiming as some do that it is some magical cure for depression. But there is no doubt that it can lift heaviness and darkness and fear and discouragement off us. Praise has a powerful effect on our inner being. Isaiah 61:3 Psalm 147:1

What do I do when I don't feel like praising him?

We started by looking at lament where we acknowledge pain and struggle. But often our struggle with praise is more around self talk. "I really don't feel like praising God." "I'm tired. I just want to watch some TV." "I just have a lot to do today, so I think I will skip the God stuff. I mean, I don't want to get too legalistic about things" or we come to church and we have

already tuned out. “Well, it won’t matter if I am a few minutes late. Only the singing.” “ Oh, I don’t like this song. And that dress is too tight on that worship leader.” We are easily distracted from praise by our feelings, by what others do and by our circumstances.

It is an act of choice. Psalm 42:5 Ps 103:1-2

Praise is costly. Costs us something. Easy to praise God when everything is going well. Why praise is described as a sacrifice. It cost us time, it costs us energy. We are actually bringing something to God. Psalm 50:14 Psalm 50: Psalm 107:22

It is an act of faith. It is declaring God’s goodness and faithfulness even when we are not experiencing it or seeing it. Habakkuk 3:17-18

Some ideas on how to get started...

Read a Psalm out loud and slowly.
Use worship music to help us.
Pray very simple you are prayers. I.e. You are faithful

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SMALL GROUP REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

1. What is one thing that God impressed upon you this week from the devotions
2. Share your experience of praise in church services and in your own time. Is it something that comes easily? Do you get distracted? Is music just not your thing?
3. What self talk gets in the way of you praising God? What could help you overcome that self talk?
4. Can you recall a time when choosing to praise God seemed to change something within you or your circumstances?
5. Why is praise often called an act of sacrifice? What are we sacrificing?
6. Discuss the idea of prayers of lament being as valid as prayers of praise. What are the dangers of lament? Do you think we should have more lament in public services?

Consider how you could end your group time with a time of praise. Either use some Youtube for sung worship, or prayers of praise focusing on God’s character. Maybe you could use a Psalm to help you. Ps 100 or 103 or 113.

Choose one of the prayer cards that come with your journal to help you pray for an area. Choose a different one from last week.