

PRAISE THE LORD!

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Reading: Psalm 148

A Psalm is a song, and especially a song of praise, expressing joy and thanksgiving to the Lord. In the book of the Word that is called "Psalms" there are one hundred and fifty songs written in beautiful poetry. Most of the Psalms were written by David, the great King of Israel. When he was a boy, David was a shepherd, tending the flocks of his father, Jesse. Shepherds, because they had to watch the sheep night and day and journey with them from place to place, were very much alone. They had no one to talk to and so they often became singers, expressing what they felt and thought in song rather than speech. And they played on harps or other instruments while they sang. So David loved to sing songs and to play the harp, and he became a great poet.

David also loved the Lord with all his heart, and when he grew up he wrote many songs in praise of the Lord. These songs were so beautiful that all the people of Israel began to sing them and grew to love them very much. They sang them in the Temple when they worshiped the Lord, even as we sing songs in our worship. The songs that we sing tell about the Lord, and we sing them then because we are thinking about Him. We think how wonderful He is, who has created the whole world with all its beautiful and useful things. And when we recall how much He has done for us and for all people our hearts are filled with joy and thankfulness.

Why do we sing? Because when we are very glad over anything that gladness makes us want to sing, even as the birds sing when they are happy. And when we love the Lord very much and think of how much He does for us, then we feel like singing songs to Him. Songs are love coming forth in sound. And when we sing about the Lord from joy of heart then the angels are with us and increase our happiness and make us very very glad, and we feel just a little touch of the joy of heaven. That is why we sing in worship when we come into the presence of the Lord and His angels.

But there may also be times when we think of how we have not obeyed the Lord and have done wrong. Then our songs are prayers to Him for help so that we may repent and turn away from evil. Because of this some songs used in worship are sad, and some of the Psalms of David are sad for the same reasons. Yet, worship should always close with a feeling of trust and confidence that the Lord will help us, and a recognition of His great Love and His infinite Power, which takes away our sadness and causes us to feel happy.

This is the reason why the last of the Psalms are joyous. The five final songs are called Psalms of praise. They all begin and end with the words "Praise the Lord!" and they describe different ways in which He is praised. To praise the Lord, in its

most obvious sense, is to think how wonderful He is and to express thanks to Him for all His manifold mercies, but it also means something more.

In the One Hundred and Forty-eighth Psalm everything in heaven and on the earth is called upon to praise the Lord: the angels, kings of the earth, all people; princes and judges; young men and maidens, old men and children; and also animals, plants, and the very mountains, winds and waves of nature. We may wonder how these last things can praise the Lord. They cannot even know Him. They cannot think about Him. Yet, they *can* praise Him, in the following way.

They praise the Lord by doing what the Lord made them to do. He has created each thing to perform some work in the world. The air gives life to all things that breathe; it carries the clouds with their rain from place to place over the earth in order that there might not be a drought, and it scatters the seeds far and wide so that plants may spring up and grow wherever there is soil to feed them. The ocean provides the moisture from which the clouds are formed, so that the water, which is poured from the clouds in rain upon the mountain tops, and runs down into the valleys as streams and rivers that water the earth, may rise again to the clouds from which it fell, so that it may be constantly used, and used again to keep alive plants, animals, and people. The mountains themselves are raised up by the Lord to spread the water over the face of the earth. If there were no mountains, if all the earth were one vast plain then the water falling from the clouds would remain where it fell. It would not be carried away to other parts of the earth.

So it is with all things in the world. Each has been wonderfully, beautifully created for some particular use by the Lord. And when something does that use for which it was made, then it praises the Lord. It shows, in the very things it does, how wise the Lord is, how powerful He is, and how loving and merciful He is toward people. So when we see the mountains, the winds and the oceans, and the wonderful uses they perform, we can understand that it is really the Lord who is doing them, and we can begin to know how wonderful He is.

It is the same with people. We praise them for what they do because it is in what they *do* that we can see how good, how kind, or how strong they are. For example, we might praise the people who led our country to freedom. And we praise them because we see that in doing these things they loved their country, they loved other people, and they loved the Lord.

So you see that even with people, praising the Lord depends upon doing what He commands, upon fulfilling the uses He created us to do. Praise is not only a song in church. Praise is worship of the heart, the worship of every day life. An evil person who breaks the Lord's Commandments and is cruel and selfish, can still sing songs of praise (as the Pharisees did so that people would think that they were good). But the praise which that person sings would not really be praise. The angels would not hear it; they would turn away in horror. They would hear it, not as a beautiful song, but as a terrible discordant sound, like the cawing of a crow that is unpleasant to the ear.

It is only when we do the Lord's will that we can really praise Him, even as the wind, waves, and mountains do what He has commanded them. Then, because we love Him from the heart and love our fellow people, our song will express that love and will be accepted in heaven. The angels will draw near when we sing, and we will feel their happiness. So remember, when the Psalms say "Praise the Lord," they do not only mean to sing songs of praise to the Lord, but also to do the Lord's will, to keep His Commandments, and to follow the teachings of His holy Word, always. When we do these things with all our might, our songs will really praise the Lord, and we will feel the delight and joy of heaven when we sing.

Amen.