

“Last Supper Songs”

Series of Psalms (Lent 2023) – part 1

Psalms 113 & 114

[48 title slide] *Welcome. Prayer*

[49 – symbols of Lent] On February 22nd, Ash Wednesday, we entered the season of Lent. Similar to the way Advent leads to Christmas, Lent is a time when we prepare for the highest holiday in the Christian year: Easter. We started with a service of confession and forgiveness on Ash Wednesday, and some of us received the ashes as a mark of humility before God. It was a time to remember our sins, remember our mortality, and more importantly, remember the mercy of our great God.

Of course, Ash Wednesday is not the only day to spend time in self-inspection. The entire season of Lent is meant to help us prepare to receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior and remember his sacrifice on the cross. To prepare our hearts over the next six weeks, we are going to use the Psalms as our guide.

[50 – music] The Psalms are literally the center of our Protestant bibles. They represent one hundred fifty passionate poems to God, poems of great depth and joy. As we study them, we will see that the words of the psalms span a full range of emotions concerning faith and life.

To help us understand the power of the psalms, let’s use a modern illustration. What is your favorite song to sing? How do you feel when you are singing it? When I’m driving, music helps direct my mood. Maybe some of you sing in the shower – that’s a good way to start your day. We use music at weddings, funerals, recitals, receptions, concerts, and of course worship, and in each place, certain songs help to convey our moods, both joyous and sad.

Do you see the red hymnals in your pews this morning? Well, the book of Psalms is the songbook for God’s people, past, present and future. Like a greatest hits album, the Psalms were compiled over centuries until they reached their final form around the 4th century B.C. - several hundred years before Christ.

Growing up in 1st century Palestine, Jesus knew these same psalms, memorized them, and prayed them. Jesus quite literally sang these psalms with his disciples.

[51 – emoticons] Just as there are many different emotions we feel, there are many different types of psalms. The most common psalms are laments – cries of woe and distress. The second most common psalms are hymns of praise. Other psalms are expressions of confidence in God, prayers for kings, psalms about God’s law, prayers for help, and more. There is a psalm for every possible circumstance in your life, from your greatest joy to your deepest sorrow.

[52 – Moses and the Red Sea crossing] Psalms 113 and 114 are psalms of praise, part of a collection known as the Egyptian Hallel, which span Psalms 113 to 118. In Hebrew, The word “Hallel” means “praise”, as in “Hallelujah!” Psalms 113 through 118 are inspired by Israel’s deliverance from bondage in Egypt. These psalms were sung at important Jewish festivals, not the least of which was Passover.

The gospels tell us that Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples the night before he died. Passover was the highest Jewish holiday of the year. It was their “Independence Day” – the anniversary of God using Moses to lead them out of slavery in Egypt across the Red Sea. In the midst of this important festival, Jesus told his disciples that someone would betray him. Then he washed their feet. And finally he instituted what we now call the “Last Supper.” And in the midst of this emotional whirlwind, we read this simple verse:

[53 – Jesus and disciples at the Last Supper] “When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.” (Matt. 26:30 and Mark 14:26.)

What song would you sing the night before you were going to die? These are the songs which Jesus sang that night, as he had sung them every Passover for over thirty years. If these songs meant so much to Jesus, we should examine them closer.

[54 - scripture with sunset] Psalm 113 starts with a command: Praise the Lord. Literally, Hallelu Yah. Hallelujah. I imagine to the 1st century Jews, it would invoke a similar feeling as when we sing, “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow.” The psalm immediately puts us in our proper place before God. We are “servants” of the Lord. (v.1).

Next, we are told when to praise God – “from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets.” (v.3) In other words, every waking moment of our lives. Did the sun rise this morning? Even if it was cloudy? Yes? Then, according to this

psalm, we should be praising God. And if it's after sunset, guess what? We should be praising God! Since Passover started after sundown, Jesus and his disciples were praising God after dark.

[55 – scripture and stars] The next part of Psalm 133 tells us why we should praise God. There is no one like God. God is above all. God literally bends down to look at the stars; we have to look up to see them. Have you ever craned your neck at night to stare up? Imagine God, leaning down on hands and knees, like we would to examine bugs on the sidewalk. That's how God sees the stars. We praise God because of God's supreme place over all creation.

[56 – scripture and dust] It gets even better. The psalmist tells us to not only praise God for who God is, but also for what God does. God raises the poor and needy from the dust. (verse 7) Think about dirt – it signifies poverty, disrespect, uncleanness. And yet God takes the people in the worst of positions and puts them in the best of positions – at the table with royalty. (verse 8) God brings children to women who are barren. (verse 9). In other words, God shatters boundaries and prejudices, and God makes all people equal. This is what God does. Hallelujah!

Psalm 113 is rather general. There are no specific memories or stories evoked by this psalm. It's an appetizer, if you will, for what comes next, the main course. Psalm 114 now evokes a very specific memory for Israel.

[57 – scripture] Let's read the first four verses again. (Psalm 114:1-4)
When Israel came out of Egypt,
 Jacob from a people of foreign tongue,
²Judah became God's sanctuary,
 Israel his dominion.
³The sea looked and fled,
 the Jordan turned back;
⁴the mountains leaped like rams,
 the hills like lambs.

If you saw “The Prince of Egypt,” you know the scene that this psalm describes; two scenes, actually. The first is the Exodus. Israel left Egypt as God parted the Red Sea. The Great Sea “fled” before the glory of God. Similarly, when Joshua and the Israelites came to the Jordan River at the very end of their

wandering, the river parted for the Israelites to cross. Psalm 114 reminds the God’s people of their salvation through great waters, which fled in the presence of the Lord.

[58 – ocean] Deep waters and seas are often a metaphor for powers that oppose God and powers that are under the control of God. Sometimes the sea represents enemy forces who oppose Israel. These verses not only remind Israel of their salvation – the crossing of the Red Sea – they also remind them that all the forces of nature and evil must flee before God’s presence. Mountains tremble before God, like a powerful earthquake. God has the power to turn rock into water, like he did for Moses. (See Exodus 17:6 and Numbers 20:11) All great reasons to praise God.

Why would Jesus, his disciples, and the rest of the Israelites for centuries sing these psalms at dinner? For one simple reason: to remind each other how good God is.

[59 – Appleseed grace] Our family prayers at the table tend to be repetitive. That’s OK, because what we sing is true, always.

“O, the Lord is good to me,
And so I thank the Lord,
For giving me the things I need,
the sun and the rain and the apple seed.
O, the Lord is good to me. Amen.” (Johnny Appleseed grace)

It makes sense that Jesus would remember all that God has done for Israel, especially when Jesus was about to face the greatest challenge of all: his own death.

[60 – woman with hand raised] These two psalms, and all the psalms we categorize as “hymns” or “psalms of praise”, remind us of the goodness of God. They reveal God’s character, and they remind us God will continue to act to save his people. When you are faced with a difficult moment in life, the best thing you can do is praise God, and remind yourself, “God has been with me before. God will be with me now and always. The Lord is good to me. Praise the Lord! Hallelujah!”

Do you praise God at all times? Is God’s praise always on your lips? (Psalm 34:1) It’s probably easy to praise God when everything is going great. It’s

probably easy to praise God when you are in church or at camp, and someone is playing the piano, organ, guitar or drums.

[61 – prison] However, can you praise God when things are bad? What about Paul and Silas in Acts 16? They were beat up, arrested, and thrown into prison. Acts 16:25 says, “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.” Midnight. The same time of day that Jesus and his disciples sang their hymns and left for the Garden of Gethsemane. Paul and Silas might have been singing these very same psalms Jesus himself sang.

This is what praising God does for us. It makes us focus on what God has done, and it puts us in our proper place before God, no matter what is going on around us. Praising gets us in the right perspective. “God first. Others second. I’m third.”

Praise is a choice, not a feeling. I don’t think Jesus was in the mood for singing the night before he died, but he did. I don’t think Paul and Silas “felt like” praising God in prison, bruised and cold, but they did. These Hallel psalms are the equivalent of “Amazing Grace” and “The Old Rugged Cross”. By remembering how God saved them in the past, the Jews expected God to deliver them again. The psalms tells us who God is and why we praise him. They help us put God in the right place – above all else.

[62 – Hallelujah] When you go out the doors today, I want you to remember one thing: when you need words to praise God, look to the psalms. Memorize them, sing them, meditate on them. Ask, Why were these authors praising God? What had God done for them?

Apply those thoughts to your life. What has God done for you? Are you breathing? Praise the Lord! Hallelujah! Are you saved? Praise the Lord! Hallelujah! Do you have hope? Praise the Lord! Hallelujah! Has God given you a family? Praise the Lord! Hallelujah! Has God given you a church? Praise the Lord! Hallelujah! Join us, add your voice. You have a psalm of praise to sing, so sing it loud. Praise the Lord! Hallelujah!

Let’s pray.

Memory verse

“I will praise the LORD at all times; His praise will always be on my lips.”

Psalms 34:1 (HCSB)

Reflection questions

1. Where and when do you find it easiest to praise God? Do you use music or scripture meditation?
2. When are the hardest times for you to praise God?
3. How does the community of faith keep you in the proper mindset before God?
4. What has God done for you? How does this memory help you praise Him?