



The Psalms

Psalm 145 I will magnify thee

27 January 2019

Richard Bauckham

Exodus 34: 1–8 Colossians 1: 15–20

The first thing to say about Psalm 145 is that it is a hymn in praise of God. The Psalms cover a range of different sorts of prayer, but towards the end of the Psalter praise tends to predominate, and from 145 onwards, up to the last psalm, 150, all the psalms are praise. The Psalter reaches a great crescendo of praise as it comes to its end.

I know that some people have a problem with the idea of praising God. Why does God want us to be constantly praising him? We tend not to think highly of people who want other people to be constantly singing their praises. Is God a sort of arrogant despot who needs to boost his ego by having everyone tell him how great and beneficent he is? The truth is that praise is not for God's benefit but for our benefit. It's in praising God that we focus on who God really is. It's like gazing at a beautiful view or a great painting. Praise is the wonder and delight we express when we see how wondrous they are. In praise of God we contemplate who God is and let God's glory and goodness sink into our consciousness.

One reason why that is so important is that it keeps us from idolatry, from harbouring a false image of God – whether that is of some sort of petty god who exists merely to serve our own interests, a genie-in-a-lamp sort of god, or whether the idol is something other than God that we treat as though it were God, something that dominates our lives but is unworthy to do so. Praise is about taking in who the true God really is.

The second thing to say about Psalm 145 is that it is poetry. I want to do something now that is unusual in a sermon. I want you to look closely at the text of this psalm and appreciate a little of how it works as poetry. That's why you have the text in a form I've designed to highlight certain features of the structure of the psalm. *[See the text printed on page 4.]* Poetry makes meaning in more ways than prose does. Its meaning is not just in the semantic content of the words, but also in structures and patterns and the sounds of words.

Like a lot of literature in the ancient world, this psalm has a concentric structure. You will see that I've put the first and the last verses in italics because they correspond very closely. When we get to the end we're reminded of where we began, but we also find that we've got somewhere. The last verse does not merely repeat the first but improves on it. In verse 1 the psalmist says he will bless God's holy name forever. In verse 21 he tells us that *all flesh* shall bless God's holy name forever. The praise of God, as it were, expands from the daily prayer of one worshipper to encompass the widest possible circle of worshippers. The rest of the psalm tells us how that expansion of praise is possible and necessary.

It tells us that praise of this God, praise of who the true God really is, can never be confined to some little circle of people like our congregation here tonight. It can and must expand to the widest possible horizon.

A concentric structure invites us to locate the centre of the poem: in this case the four couplets that you see printed in red (vv.10–13a). A glance at those can easily tell you that the focus of the psalm is on the kingdom of God. It says much the same as the doxology we say at the end of the Lord's Prayer: 'Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever.' God is the creator of all things and he is supreme over all things forever. So all his creatures and all his people give him thanks and praise (v.10).

Notice how the little word 'all' recurs through those verses printed in red. In fact, the word 'all' is remarkably frequent in this psalm. It's the most common word in the whole psalm, which is otherwise notable for varying its vocabulary and not repeating words. 'All' occurs eighteen times in the Hebrew (there are some variations in the English). This is a psalm that emphasizes universality. And there's another formal feature of the psalm that makes the same point. The psalm is an acrostic. In other words, each of the 22 couplets begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet in the order of the alphabet. That's why on the right hand side of your text I have put the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, one beside each couplet. It's a poetic discipline a bit like, say, the tight form of an English sonnet. But it also says something. It underlines the message of universality. The psalm is a kind of A–Z of God's goodness to all his creatures.

Returning to that central section of the psalm, we can see that it's about God the all-powerful ruler of the whole creation. But it doesn't tell us *how* God rules. Does God's rule consist in care for his creatures or is it oppressive? To answer that question we have to look to the verses either side of the central section. You'll see that I've put some words in bold print in verses 8 and 13b. Those words are a quotation from the passage we read as our Old Testament reading tonight, the story of how God revealed his character to Moses (Exodus 34:1–8). It's the classic description in the Hebrew Bible of what God is like, his moral character, and it's echoed again and again through the Old Testament. Psalm 145 has one of the fullest quotations from it. Verse 8 reads, 'The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love', and then verse 13b picks up the character description again with the words 'faithful' and 'gracious'.

Here is where our psalm makes its own special contribution: If you read that character description of God in Exodus 34 you might well think that it's only about how God deals with his own special people Israel. But our psalmist is one of those Old Testament writers who has realised that if God is like that in his dealings with Israel he must be like that in the way he deals with his whole creation. So the psalmist has added in verse 9 his own paraphrase of the description: 'The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made'. The key thing is that he has introduced the word 'all' – and that verse is where his constant repetition of the word 'all' begins in earnest. From verse 9 onwards 'all' recurs in almost every couplet up to the end.

God is good – and 'good' here is not a colourless word. It's a big word, encompassing all those qualities of grace, mercy, steadfast love and so on. God is good to *all that he has made*. He is good and compassionate not only to all people, but actually to all creatures. The psalmist really does mean 'creatures' without exception, as you can see if you read on to verses 15–16, which celebrate God's provision for the needs of all creatures. If you doubt whether the God of the Bible cares about the natural world as well as human beings, Psalm 145 is one of the texts that should definitely put you right on that. God's goodness, his concern, extends to all that he has made. He created all things and he cares for all creatures.

So when we put the central section of the psalm together with the key couplets that surround it we see how the psalm's universalism is rooted in its understanding of God as the creator of all things who, like the ideal king in the Old Testament's view, cares for all his creatures. The psalm then goes on, in verses 14 to the end, to run through all sorts of ways in which God is good to all his creatures. Again like the ideal king, he does not neglect the downtrodden and the unsuccessful in life, but 'upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down' (v.14). He makes himself always available for those who petition him and need his intervention (vv.18–19). And because he cares for all he must be severe with those who harm and oppress others. We modern readers may well feel unhappy with that penultimate verse: 'all the wicked he will destroy' (v.20). But the point is that, for the sake of the good of all his creation, God cannot in the end tolerate evil. He is slow to anger, patient with people, quick to forgive those who turn from evil, but those who persist in evil cannot be allowed to go on exploiting others for ever.

We come again at the last verse:

My mouth shall speak the praise of the LORD,
and *all flesh* shall bless his holy name for ever and ever.

Now we can now see *how* the psalmist's own praise could hardly do otherwise than expand to the widest possible circle of worshippers. By the way, the Psalms are quite happy with the idea that creatures other than humans worship God, and so we ought to give that phrase 'all flesh' a wider reference than just humans, taking up what the psalm has said about God's care for all creatures.

Praise of God is about focusing on who God really is. Because of who God is, the God of all people and all creatures, the God whose loving concern embraces all that he has made, our praise can never be confined to just ourselves and God. In praise we join with all those who worship God in heaven and earth and we even join in hope with those who do not yet but will realise who God really is and be drawn to adore God.

Psalm 145

A	<i>I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your Name forever and ever.</i>	א
<2>	Every day I will bless you, and praise your Name forever and ever.	ב
<3>	Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable.	ג
B	<4> One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.	ד
<5>	On the glorious splendour of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.	ה
<6>	The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed, and I will declare your greatness.	ו
<7>	They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness, and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.	ז
<8>	The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.	ח
<9>	The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.	ט
C	<10> <i>All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD, and all your faithful shall bless you.</i>	י
<11>	<i>They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power,</i>	יא
<12>	<i>to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendour of your kingdom.</i>	יב
<13a>	<i>Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations.</i>	יג
D	<13b> The LORD is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds.	יד
<14>	The LORD upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down.	טו
<15>	The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.	טז
<16>	You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.	טז
<17>	The LORD is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings.	יז
<18>	The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.	יח
<19>	He fulfils the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them.	יט
<20>	The LORD watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.	כ
<21>	<i>My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD, and all flesh will bless his holy Name forever and ever.</i>	כא