

DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

April 3, 2022 | *Our Highest Praise*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

What makes a person worthy of national recognition?

Read Psalm 113.

Pray this lesson will help you glimpse the extent to which God deserves our praise.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God deserves our highest praise.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

God's praise has implications for every area of our lives

MEDITATE

*"Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?"
(Psalm 113:5-6).*

GETTING STARTED

+This section introduces Psalm 113 by viewing the substantial influence it has had in a young woman's life.

Q: *What biblical passages have personal significance for you?*

Q: *What is it about these passages that speaks so directly to you?*

While all of God’s Word is important, many Christians can identify specific biblical passages that hold special significance for them. Second Samuel 23:8–37 probably does not mean much to you, but for me, it was the passage being preached when I recognized that God was calling me to salvation. It recounts the exploits of David’s mighty men. It is hardly the “Romans road to salvation,” but it influenced my life in a significant way. Numbers 12 holds a similar importance for me. It was the passage from which I preached my first sermon.

In 1998, Rosaria Butterfield attended a meeting at the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Syracuse, New York. She had been attending for some time and several of the women had taken a special interest in her. At the time, she was a committed feminist and identified as a lesbian. That morning the church sang a song during worship that stemmed from the words of Psalm 113. She was fine with the opening lines declaring God’s praise, but the conclusion of the psalm offended her to the core. Although she wanted to discredit the message of Psalm 113, some part of her recognized it was true. As she wrestled with its implications, she eventually saw that the words of this psalm perfectly encapsulated God’s message of grace for her. She repented of sin and confessed her belief in Christ.

A few years later, Psalm 113 changed her life again. A promising academic, Rosaria had earned a PhD in English literature and held a tenured post at Syracuse University, but she recognized that this psalm esteemed family and children. The man she had become interested in wanted to be a church planter. So, based on the message of Psalm 113, she resigned her teaching position and became a church planter’s wife. She homeschooled their adopted children and taught high school English at their homeschool co-op. God used Psalm 113 to make a powerful difference in Rosaria’s life. God can use Psalm 113 to speak powerfully to you as well.

Q: *What implications does God’s praise have for your life?*

Q: *Why would someone be open to praising God but not obeying Him?*

APPLICATION POINT – One of the most remarkable things about Rosaria’s story is that she was not opposed to praising God. That made sense to her. But when the psalmist fleshed out the implications of God’s praise to a specific matter of her life, she recoiled. I suspect most of us find ourselves in similar situations. We may not mind

praising God as long as our praise does not make deep inroads into our lives. We do not mind praising God as long as His praise makes no demand on our finances. We do not mind praising God as long as His praise does not require us to deny what our culture says is okay. But that kind of praise is no more than lip service, and it is far less than the praise Psalm 113 envisions. If you want to truly praise God, you must embrace every implication His praise will have for your life.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Psalms 113–118 are known as the *Hallel*, which means praise. These psalms were sung when Israel celebrated Passover, a commemoration of God delivering them from Egyptian bondage. They were sung to praise Him for His deliverance.

1. PRAISING GOD'S NAME

2. PRAISING THE EXALTED GOD

3. PRAISING THE GOD WHO REVERSES THE PLIGHT OF THE NEEDY

GOING DEEPER

+Psalm 113 contains three easily identifiable stanzas. Stanza one (verses 1–3) emphasizes the praise of God's name. Stanza two (verses 4–6) emphasizes the highness of God. Stanza three (verses 7–9) describes how this exalted God reverses the plight of the needy.

1. PRAISING GOD'S NAME

■ PSALM 113:1–3

Q: How did the psalmist describe the extent of God's praise?

Q: What does "from the rising of the sun to its setting" mean?

The psalmist viewed God's praise as inexhaustible. He called his audience to praise God from the moment of their deliverance to evermore. He provided no limit or qualification concerning the end of our praise, nor did he allude to any interruption or pause in it. The people of God will praise Him forever.

This psalmist illustrated the inexhaustible nature of God's praise by calling attention to the sun. Before clocks and other accurate time-keeping measures were widely available, people organized activities around the position of the sun in the sky—sunrise, noon, mid-afternoon, and evening. The psalmist declared that no matter where the sun was positioned in the sky, it was always an appropriate time to praise God. Since the rising and the setting sun mark an entire day of sunlight, the psalmist was effectively saying we should be ready to praise God all the time, even during the hours of darkness not strictly included in the psalmist's figure of speech.

❓: *How can you extend your praise of God beyond times of corporate worship?*

❓: *Do you ever feel discouraged by the expectations of the psalmists?*

APPLICATION POINT – When a significant figure dies or on special days of remembrance in our country, we lower our flags to half-staff as an expression of mourning and respect. Regardless of the occasion, however, the flags are not kept at half-mast for more than a few days. No matter how significant the person or momentous the occasion, the country cannot remain in a continued state of observance. Such is not the case with God. God is deserving of our praise every minute of every hour of every day. If God's praise ceases, it is because of our limitations as worshippers, not His worthiness. Thus, we require God's grace even in terms of praise. We fall infinitely short of giving God the praise He is due.

❓: *Why did the psalmist focus on God's name?*

❓: *In what other contexts in the Old Testament is the name of God important?*

The psalmist emphasized the centrality of God's name when we worship Him. God's name is commonly associated with His redeeming acts in the Old Testament. For example, after God announced His intention to free the Israelites

from Egyptian bondage and to use Moses to do it, Moses inquired about His name (Exodus 3:13). He believed the knowledge of God's name would be crucial in winning the support of the people. Later, after an initial set back, God utilized His name to create continuity between the Israelites and the patriarchs (Exodus 6:3). Just as God was faithful to the patriarchs, He would be faithful to the Israelites. The psalmist drew attention to God's name because God's name is a sure indication that He will act on His people's behalf.

Q: *How are you maintaining the reputation of God's name?*

Q: *How does praising God's name add a more personal dynamic to our worship?*

APPLICATION POINT – Christians are often regarded as hypocrites. Some of this animosity is unfounded both logically and theologically, nevertheless, it is a problem when unbelievers think the followers of God cannot be trusted. We are called to praise God's name, but when we act hypocritically or in any unworthy manner, we make His name a subject of scorn. The deeper problem is that even though Christians claim redemption in Jesus Christ, we have not yet been fully absolved of a sinful nature, so we cannot help but to discredit the name of God on a daily basis. The psalmist's call to praise God's name is a reminder of our need for His grace throughout the course of our lives.

2. PRAISING THE EXALTED GOD

■ PSALMS 113:4–6

Q: *Why is God repeatedly described as "high" or "above" in these verses?*

Q: *Why would highness be linked to praise?*

Psalm 113:4–6, just three verses, contain four references to God being high above the created order. The "highness" language used here is fairly intuitive for us. Just as in the day of the psalmist, a lofted or elevated position connotes honor in our society. Nevertheless, it is helpful for us to consider why this is the case. One reason highness corresponds to honor is simply due to visibility. People or objects perched on a stand are more

visible. The Grand Canyon is over a mile deep in some locations, but you do not have to be very far from the rim before this magnificent canyon is out of sight. Pike's Peak in Colorado, on the other hand, rises about as far above its surroundings as the Grand Canyon dips below, but it is visible from over a hundred miles away. By elevating what we intend to praise, it comes into the view of more people and therefore receives more honor.

Q: *In what ways can we exalt God before others?*

Q: *Why should we be thankful that God intends to be exalted in the earth?*

APPLICATION POINT – Psalm 113:4 declares that God is high above all nations. His praise and glory among the nations is a frequent theme in the book of Psalms. It is remarkable that God desires to be seen and praised by fallen humanity. His desire to be praised constitutes an invitation to seek Him in repentance. God did not owe us this grace. He would have been perfectly just in abandoning humanity and being content in the fellowship among the other persons of His triune nature. His decision to be highly exalted on earth coincides with His decision to offer salvation to humanity. If God did not desire praise, we would have no hope.

Q: *How does God's highness contrast to our lowness?*

Q: *How do Genesis 11:1-9 and Isaiah 14:12-15 show humanity's resistance to God's highness?*

The psalmist's vision of God as high above all else can be easily contrasted with the desire from humanity to highly exalt themselves. This urge is on display for all to see in the tower of Babel narrative in Genesis 11:1-9. The builders wanted to construct a tower with its tops in the heavens and make a name for themselves (Genesis 11:4). The correlation between their ambitions and Psalm 113 is easy to see. What Psalm 113 ascribes to God the architects of Babel wanted for themselves. God, however, is unmatched. He came down to see the city and the tower the architects believed would rival Him, and although their tower was no match for God, He would not tolerate any attempt to confiscate His glory. With a simple command, He confused the language of those who would usurp His glory. While the builders of Babel likened themselves to God, God easily undid their scheme by undermining their common language, one of the most basic aspects of their daily life.

Likewise, the king of Babylon, described in Isaiah 14:12–15, intended to ascend to the heavens and take his place as God’s rival. The language Isaiah used to describe this king is so sinister that many church fathers concluded he was describing Satan’s fall from heaven. Although this ruler fancied himself as God’s equal, he fell to the furthest reaches of the earth. He was no match for the exalted God of Psalm 113.

Q: *In what ways do you try to make much of yourself and try to rival God?*

Q: *Why is it always futile to seek our own glory instead of God’s?*

APPLICATION POINT – Pride and arrogance are difficult sins to pin down. It is hard to imagine that even the smuggest and most egotistical people today would dare align themselves with the ambitions of the builders of Babel or the king of Babylon. At least they would not admit to it aloud. Very few of us aspire to political office or to become the CEO of a major corporation. These aspirations are not inherently prideful or sinful; in fact, they can be noble endeavors. But most people I know would rather live their lives in a simpler, more private setting. Given this outlook, many people might conclude that the pride that consumed the builders of Babel and the king of Babylon is not something they struggle with. But we may be surprised to see how much of a grip pride has on us. We do not have to aspire to their exploits to be just as consumed by the same sin. This is why many of us are so offended when we feel slighted in even the most menial way. If a vehicle cuts me off in traffic, I am enraged for the better part of an hour. I remember the faces and smirks of drivers I had an altercation with years ago. These moments are burned into my memory. But if someone does an act of kindness for me, it does not tend to stay with me as long. What does this say about my struggle with pride? Even though I might not see myself as trying to unseat God from His throne, I may be sitting there more firmly settled than I think. Pride holds a deeper and tighter grip on our hearts than most of us realize.

2. PRAISING THE GOD WHO REVERSES THE PLIGHT OF THE NEEDY

PSALMS 113:7–9

Q: *How is God’s reversal of human fortunes related to His praise?*

Q: *How do the verbs “raises” and “lifts” fit in the flow of thought in this psalm?*

The psalmist changes course during the final stanza. He still offered praise to God but did it by drawing attention to how God intervened among His creatures rather than ascribing praise directly to Him. The focus in this stanza is how God intervenes to reverse the fortunes of those in need. From His exalted perch, God lifts those in need out of their lowly situation and raises them to a position of prominence. Barrenness was a social stigma in the ancient Near East. For a married woman to have no children made her a disgrace to her husband and an outcast in society. By His intervention, God is able to make the barren woman a joyful mother. God’s intervention among those in need demonstrates why He was worthy of the praise offered by the psalmist.

Q: *Does God continue to intervene in our lives today such that He may be exalted?*

Q: *Why does the psalmist offer God praise by drawing attention to His actions in the last stanza?*

APPLICATION POINT: Psalm 113 declares the glory of the exalted God. One marvelous aspect of our exalted God is that He refuses to stand aloof in all His marvelous grandeur. Earlier in this passage, the psalmist saw His glory against the backdrop of the nations. The implication is that God would be exalted among the nations. In the last stanza, we again see God’s highness in relation to His creatures, but the psalmist did not restrain himself to a generic application of God’s grandeur. He noted specific situations in which God would work. The key for us is to recognize that these specific situations do not exhaust the ways in which God will demonstrate His exaltedness to His people. No matter what need you are dealing with, God can use your situation to draw attention to Himself and win the praise of others. We merely need to trust Him.

Q: *How does Psalm 113:7-9 correspond to 1 Samuel 2:5, 8?*

Q: *How does Psalm 113 illustrate Hannah’s situation in 1 Samuel 1?*

The third stanza of Psalm 113 contains a hidden clue to illustrate its message for the readers. Psalm 113:7–8 quotes 1 Samuel 2:8 and alludes to 1 Samuel 2:5. This reuse of earlier biblical material may not have been as “hidden” for the original readers as it is for us. They knew their Scriptures very well and their ears were trained to pick up on this kind of allusion. These verses from 1 Samuel 2 are part of Hannah’s song. Her story is told in 1 Samuel 1. Her husband, Elkanah, had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah was barren. Peninnah used Hannah’s barrenness to ridicule her and win their husband’s favor. Heartbroken, Hannah asked God for a child when her family was visiting the sanctuary at the time of a yearly sacrifice. God heard her request and granted her a child. Hannah’s response in song is recorded in 1 Samuel 2. It bears a striking resemblance to Mary’s Magnificat in Luke 1:46–55. Just as God heard Hannah’s prayer and reversed her fortunes by giving her a son, the psalmist believed God could act in a similar way for His people if they only believed in Him.

Q: *How does Psalm 113 allude to other Old Testament passages?*

Q: *Why is it helpful to view the psalms against the backdrop of a narrative?*

APPLICATION POINT – I’ve related my struggle to understand the psalms. I’m simply not geared toward enjoying poetic language and extensive metaphors. But I have learned some practices I think help me to appreciate Psalms in my own way. One of these practices has been to appreciate how they illustrate and develop the Old Testament’s narrative sections, as Psalm 113:7–9 does. Psalms are not isolated units distinct from the rest of Scripture. They frequently reference major events in Israel’s past, such as the exodus from Egypt or the exile, or anticipate God’s action on Israel’s behalf in the future. Recognizing these narrative links helps me understand them in light of the larger Old Testament narrative. I can appreciate how Psalms contributes to the larger storyline linking the Old Testament together.

NEXT STEPS

The psalmist calls us to praise God's name. In the Old Testament, the patriarchs and others referred to God in ways that highlighted some quality of His character or some deed He had accomplished on their behalf. They were effectively naming God in a way that carried a special significance for them. For example, in Genesis 16:13, Hagar referred to God as El-Roi, or the God who sees. Take a few moments and follow their examples. What are some ways you could refer to God that would hold special significance to you? The goal of this exercise is to encourage you to think about God's nature and what He has accomplished on your behalf. Doing so will help you praise His name.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

Father, open my heart to receive your Word like I never have before.

God, you are indeed high and worthy to be praised. Forgive me for making much of myself and not enough of you.

Father, I join the psalmist in celebrating what you have accomplished for your people. You have saved us for yourself so you might receive our praise.

God, I praise you for the great reversals you have accomplished throughout history. You make the proud stumble and exalt the weak. You fill the poor and leave the rich in need in accordance with Your justice. You fill empty hearts with joy and bring down those who oppose you.