

The ABCs of Praise

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

Praise the LORD!

*I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.*

²*Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.*

³*Full of splendor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.*

⁴*He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.*

⁵*He provides food for those who fear him;
he remembers his covenant forever.*

⁶*He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the inheritance of the nations.*

⁷*The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy;*

⁸*they are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.*

⁹*He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.
Holy and awesome is his name!*

¹⁰*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever! – Psalm 111, ESV*

Introduction: Alphabet of Praise

Wouldn't it be neat to know what songs Jesus sang in worship, as He was growing up and as a man in ancient Israel? Well, with the psalms we were learning this week and next, we have come to two psalms that Jesus almost certainly sang repeatedly in His life.

Psalm 111 is an alphabetic acrostic poem. It has 22 lines, not counting the opening "Praise the LORD." These 22 lines each begin with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in order. Psalm 112 has the exact same pattern and the two psalms form a pair. Psalm 112 even picks up where the message of Psalm 111 leaves off. So we will look at Psalm 112 next week.

Psalm 111 is "The ABCs of Praise" and Psalm 112 is "The ABCs of Righteousness."

The outline of Psalm 111 is simple. Verse 1 contains a call to praise the Lord, followed by the psalmist's personal resolve to praise the Lord. Verses 2-9 then give us reasons to praise the Lord and verse 10 concludes with the results, or fruit, of praising the LORD, which is then unfolded in detail in Psalm 112.

We don't know who wrote these psalms or when they were written, but they were written together and were written to be sung publicly and privately as instruction in praising God and living for His glory. These songs would have been taught to young children to memorize, which is part of the purpose of the acrostic form. They were likely sung at times of important festivals and celebrations.

Matthew 26:30 tells us that Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn after the Lord's Supper as they headed out toward the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane. One school of thought held that Psalm 111 was a likely candidate for the hymn Jesus sang with His disciples at this time. As the middle praise section ends with, "He has sent redemption to his people; he has commanded (or ordained) his covenant forever," this does seem to fit the context both of the Passover celebration and of this last evening Jesus spent with His disciples.

So here we have a psalm that was learned by Jesus as a boy, probably memorized and sung regularly, which may also have been one of the final songs He ever sang with His disciples before the cross. Whether it was sung that night or not, this is a beautiful, powerful hymn, which calls us all to a deeper worship of our great God for His great works and His matchless character, especially as expressed in His covenant and our redemption.

I. Resolve to Praise God (v. 1)

Psalm 111 opens with a call to "Praise the LORD." This is the Hebrew Hallel-u-jah. This opening marks Psalm 111 as the first "Hallal-u-jah" psalm. There are twelve psalms which either begin or end with "Hallal-u-jah":

- Eight of them begin and end with "Hallel-u-jah" or "Praise the LORD." [113, 117, 135, 146-150]
- Two of them – Psalms 115 & 116 – end on "Hallel-u-jah"
- Psalms 111 & 112 – the first two Hallel psalms - open with this call to "Praise the LORD!"

It is interesting to note how often God calls us to praise Him in His word. Maybe you're so accustomed to it that you don't think of it as interesting, but as a young adult, C.S. Lewis was bothered by the fact that God in the Bible is always calling people to praise Him. He said that it made Him think of God as an insecure old lady always fishing for compliments.

And then he suddenly realized what he was missing. He describes this in his chapter on praise in *Reflections on the Psalms*:

But the most obvious fact about praise — whether of God or anything — strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honour. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise . . .

The world rings with praise — lovers praising their mistresses [Romeo praising Juliet and vice versa], readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite game — praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars . . .

I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: “Isn’t she lovely? Wasn’t it glorious? Don’t you think that magnificent?” The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about.

My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can’t help doing, about everything else we value. . .

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed.

A. Whole-Hearted Praise

C.S. Lewis’ description of praise matches perfectly with the kind of praise described here, and it reflects the kind of praise that God desires. Once the psalmist calls for praise, he then expresses his resolve:

*I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.*

Praise that comes from delighting in God is first of all whole-hearted. The psalmist will praise God with his whole heart, which is only possible if he is truly delighting in the LORD. God is worthy of our whole-hearted praise because He is worthy of our whole-hearted delight. He is praiseworthy because He is supremely delightful.

B. Private and Public Praise

But just as Lewis described, whole-hearted praise springing from whole-hearted delight seeks to invite others into the experience, seeks corporate delight and praise. “In the company of the upright” describes a smaller gathering of true believers. “In the congregation” or “in the assembly” describes a larger, more public gathering.

Corporate worship is vital to our spiritual health. Psalm 111:1 has close parallel to Ephesians 5:18-20, which begins Paul’s section on living a Spirit-filled life:

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ – Ephesians 5:18-20, ESV

II. Reasons to Praise God (vv. 2-9)

What reasons do we have for praising God and giving thanks to Him? Verses 2-9 give us a full range of reasons for praising God with thanksgiving.

A. His Great Works

The first reasons given for praising God are His great works:

*Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.*

³*Full of splendor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.*

⁴*He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.*

The works of the Lord are great, they are full of splendor and majesty and they are wondrous. In these three verses, three different words for “works” are used:

1. The first word for “works” in verse 2 is a word commonly used for the work one does as an occupation, as labor. This word is used in Psalms 8 & 19 to refer to God’s work of creation.
2. The second word used for “work” in verse 3 is used for an act or a deed, something you accomplish or do. This is often used of God’s saving deeds on behalf of His people.

3. The third word, which is translated “wondrous works” in verse 4, is a word for wonders, marvels, miracles, supernatural acts of God.

So we can see that God’s works are not all of the same kind. He works in creation, as the work of His hands, seen in the natural world. These works are “studied by all who delight in them.” Here is an invitation to study God’s creation closely and with a delight in these works of God as a ground for praise to God. The two most insightful, original, brilliant thinkers about God’s creation and the nature of these works have probably been Sir Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein, both of whom saw God in what they studied.

Newton said, *“This most beautiful system of the sun, planets and comets, could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being.”* He also said, *“In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God's existence.”* and *“There are more sure marks of authenticity in the Bible than in any profane history.”*

Einstein was not a Christian like Newton, and his views of God were not the same as ours, but he did believe that he saw the works of God when he studied creation. He said, *“I want to know how God created this world. I am not interested in this or that phenomenon, in the spectrum of this or that element. I want to know His thoughts; the rest are details.”*

He also said, *“Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the Universe—a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble.”*

But if the work of God in creation can inspire such awe and praise, how much more should we be able to worship God when we ponder His work in redeeming His people? His saving acts throughout history, both those which are supernatural and marvelous and those which appear to be more mundane, should all cause us to respond with praise and joyful delight in the God who works in such great, splendid, majestic and marvelous ways for the salvation of His people.

B. His Great Character

But as we contemplate God’s works and praise Him for them, we see God’s character reflected in His works, and so we not only praise Him for His works but also for His character. We can see the psalmist doing this. Consider how he repeatedly directly connects God’s works to His character as revealed in those works

*Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.*

³ *Full of splendor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.*

- ⁴ *He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered;*
the LORD is gracious and merciful.
- ⁵ *He provides food for those who fear him;*
he remembers his covenant forever.
- ⁶ *He has shown his people the power of his works,*
in giving them the inheritance of the nations.
- ⁷ *The works of his hands are faithful and just;*
all his precepts are trustworthy;
- ⁸ *they are established forever and ever,*
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
- ⁹ *He sent redemption to his people;*
he has commanded his covenant forever.
Holy and awesome is his name!

God's righteousness endures forever. He is gracious and merciful. He remembers His covenant forever. He performs His precepts with faithfulness and uprightness. Holy and awesome is His name!

We could spend so much time on each of these marvelous attributes of God, but we don't have that much time. What we need to see is that studying God's works, as revealed in creation and in Scripture, reveals to us the character of God, the attributes of God. God invites us to study His work in order to see His character.

Bruno Mars is not the only one who can say, "Don't believe me? Just watch!" As Jesus Himself said in John 10:37-38: "*If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.*"

C. His Great Covenant

As the psalmist is praising God for His works and for what His works reveal about His character, He twice emphasizes God's covenant.

he remembers his covenant forever. – v. 5

he has commanded (or ordained) his covenant forever. – v. 9

God's covenant is so centrally important because it is by His covenant that God pledges Himself to His people and that the great power of His mighty works and His great and holy character and united and committed to His people for our eternal good.

God will always act consistently with His character as God. He will never sin or lie or change, for He is perfect in all of His ways. God's works will always be great, for He is God, and what He does reflects His character and His greatness. However, in the covenant He has made with His people, God has freely and voluntarily bound Himself with an oath to direct His works for our eternal good.

In Scripture, He does so in unfolding stages through covenant promises made at distinct times, but all of these promises are the unfolding of one great covenant of grace, which the psalmist calls "his covenant."

So, when God calls Abraham and promises to give Him a holy offspring to bless the nations and to give Him the promised land, this is one stage in the unfolding of the covenant of grace.

When God gives His holy laws to Israel through Moses, this good provision for His people is another step in the unfolding of the covenant of grace, as God reveals His holy character and shows them how to live as His holy people, while also giving His people glimpses of the redeeming work of Christ in the ceremonial law.

When God promises David that He will give him a son who will sit on his throne over God's people forever, the Davidic covenant is another step in the unfolding revelation of God's covenant of grace.

The covenant unfolds in these steps almost like the gradual unveiling of a masterpiece – God calls a people, promises a Son, promises a place, gives a law, shows the need of redemption by blood, promises an eternal king.

When Jesus steps into the world, He Himself embodies all of the covenant promises of God, as He Himself embodies the work of God for the good of His people. He is the promised son who brings us into God's promised land, the eternal kingdom of God. He is the lamb of God who takes away our sin, and he is also the Great High Priest. As both lamb and priest, He offers Himself on the cross in our place, freely atoning for our sins. He is the promised Son of David, the eternal king who sits on the throne over God's kingdom forever.

So when the psalmist says that God remembers His covenant forever and that He has established, ordained or commanded His covenant forever, he is saying that God will never forget His promises to save His people and He has established these promises, this covenant pledge, this relationship of salvation, forever.

D. His Great Redemption

The culmination of the reasons for praise in verses 2-9 comes with this second mentioning of God's covenant in verse 9:

*“He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.
Holy and awesome is his name!*

“He has sent redemption to His people.” The sending of redemption is the evidence that God has indeed established, ordained or commanded His covenant forever.

This simple word “redemption” carries much weight. It indicates distinction, that God has marked out and identified His people as distinct from the rest of the world. But it also indicates being bought back and set free. In Exodus, God used the plagues to distinguish His people, living in Goshen, from the rest of Egypt. He marked them out as His own, but He did so in order to bring them out of slavery and then ultimately into His promised land.

Moses and Joshua did not bring ultimate redemption to God’s people. The people settled in the promised land and traded one form of slavery for another, as they gave themselves to idols and were brought into oppression by the surrounding nations. Jesus would have to come and bring the final redemption, release not from Egypt but from the bondage of sin that reigns in our hearts.

If we have received this redemption in Jesus Christ, if we have been marked out as belonging to God, bought back by the blood of Jesus and set free by His Holy Spirit, then we must respond as the psalmist and exclaim with joy, “Holy and awesome is His name!”

III. Results of Praising God (v. 10)

So then what is the fruit that praising God bears in our lives? Verse 10 begins to answer this, an answer which is further developed in Psalm 112:

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever!*

A. Wisdom

Wisdom begins with the fear of the LORD. Praising God causes our hearts to develop the fear of the LORD. The fear of the LORD can even be defined by the last line of verse 9. When we say, from the heart – with all of our heart, in private and in public – “Holy and awesome is His name!” then we know the fear of the LORD. And then, and only then, will we begin to walk in wisdom. Wisdom is not having all the right answers or sounding really eloquent; it is living rightly, according to God’s will and for His glory.

B. Understanding

Those who practice the fear of the LORD and thus walk in wisdom have a good understanding. Understanding can be defined as insight, good sense, discretion and prudence. In other words, the fear of the LORD helps us to have true insight into the nature of things and to understand what is best and right to do in certain situations.

C. Eternal Life

The third benefit of a life of praising God is eternal life. Now, we must be careful not to misunderstand this. It's not true that if we praise God and develop the fear of the LORD and walk in wisdom and understanding, then we will earn eternal life for ourselves. No. That's a serious misunderstanding.

The final line of Psalm 111 simply reminds us as a closing call to worship that God's praise endures forever. The psalm opens with "Praise the LORD!" and ends with a reminder that God's praise endures forever.

Where we see eternal life is in the eternal nature of the covenant commitment God has made to His people. Look at what Psalm 111 says. It uses the word "forever" four times:

and his righteousness endures forever. - v. 3

he remembers his covenant forever. – v. 5

*He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever. – v. 9*

His praise endures forever! – v. 10

God's righteousness endures forever. "God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us so, that through Him we might become the righteousness of God." – 2 Cor. 5:21

He remembers and has established His covenant forever. His covenant which is the source of our redemption, our forgiveness, our freedom in Christ, is an eternal covenant. It will never end.

His praise, which endures forever, will be offered from our lips, as the redeemed and liberated covenant people of God, who will sing of how holy and awesome is His name forever and ever!