

Creation Psalms

Psalm 145 – The Completeness of Creation

For Your Reflection

Choose a hat that God might wear (e.g. Police helmet? Santa hat? Judge's wig? Bobble hat? Crown?). There might be several different hats that reflect different aspects of how you think of God. Reflect back and think if your view of God is different today than when you were younger. What has prompted the changes (if any) and can you identify ways in which God inspired the change?

Go through the psalm and list the psalmist's reasons for praising God. Are there reasons that ring especially true for you? Can you say why? If you were writing a similar list, are there things you leave out or things you would add?

Think about someone you care about. How do you express that care? You could turn this around and think about care that has been shown to you and list the various ways in which you experience(d) care and love.

In what ways do you express care for creation? Do any of those actions connect with the actions of God in the psalm? For any that don't seem to connect, try writing a psalm verse that speaks about God, in connection with your action. (For example, what could you say in praise of God that resonates with recycling waste?)

My Reflection

At first sight, this might seem like an odd choice for a collection of 'Creation Psalms'. There is no specific mention of God's creative work, nor is there any description of specific animals or plants. However, if we dig deeper, I think we will see a very important theme emerge: God's love is universal. God cares for every creature and every creature has a part to play in giving God glory and praise. The psalm therefore challenges me in how I regard the animals and plants living alongside me, and it challenges me to play my part in making the praises of all creation complete. So please read on!

Psalm 145 is the only psalm to be given the title 'Praise'. It is an acrostic poem: in other words, each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

On a practical level, this could be to make the poem easier to memorise. On a theological level, it gives an impression of completeness. Also, poetic disciplines like rhyme or rhythm, or strict forms like sonnets or haikus, have a kind of order that has a beauty of itself. There may be a theological point to make about acrostic poems in the bible: that great truth has great beauty.

Perhaps the acrostic discipline prevents Psalm 145 from developing much. Each verse expresses something different about God's greatness, as if walking around a statue and describing it from different angles. Robert Alter challenges the way many English versions give a future sense to the language of vv.1-7, 10-11 and 21, and suggests that it would be better to translate these as (e.g. in v.1) "May I extol" or "Let me extol". This would not affect the psalmist's expression of desire or intention, but it makes it less assured, and it brings the whole psalm more strongly into the present tense and the present moment. Walter Brueggemann says of this present-moment mood of the psalm that what is true at the beginning is true at the end. God's greatness, God's provision, God's faithfulness and so on are true now and always.

There is a sense of ongoing present continuity in the psalm. The praises of vv.4-7 and 11-13 mix praise for God's character with praise for God's actions, but those actions are not specified until vv.14-20. No historical acts are mentioned, rather general out-workings of God's grace: "The LORD upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down." (v.14). Similarly, in vv.15-16, God's daily provision of food for all creatures is praised. This daily, ongoing care of God for God's creation is no less wonderful than the majestic, unsearchable greatness of God in v.3, and perhaps forms a right basis for faith in God's faithfulness: thankfulness for grace at the most mundane level is fundamental to a life of praise and foundational to a relationship of trust in God for everything else too. If love is simply an abstract idea, it's useless. When you're hungry, you need food. My praise to God begins with my daily bread, otherwise it becomes detached from reality. Likewise, my concern for others, including the majority-creation, needs to be practical and be expressed at the most basic level.

For me, the heart of the psalm is v.8, beautifully expressed in the Grail translation: "The Lord is kind and full of compassion, slow to anger, abounding in love." This echoes similar statements in the bible, e.g. Psalm 103.8 and Exodus 34.6. Verse 9 applies this compassion to all that God has made and so prevents it simply being an abstract philosophical idea. Further application is specified in v.14, as well as the provision of food in vv.15-16. The universality of this acrostic psalm is important to note. It is a poem about the whole of creation, every creature being

subject to the steadfast, faithful, compassionate love of God. God is not only concerned with humanity but all that God has made (v.9).

Religion has a deadly tendency to picture a different kind of god: one who is basically angry, or at best disappointed, and who takes personal offence at the slightest misdemeanor. This god needs to be pacified with sacrifice and flattered with praise – basically manipulated so that I'll be OK. But in most religious schemes, it's likely that only a few will be OK. Perhaps it's God who manipulates us, through a combination of threats of hell (or other punishments) and offers of rewards, as if we go through life with a loaded gun at our temples. This is a caricature, but this kind of thinking seems to come easily to us and too much Christian thought has adopted something like it as the lens through which we read the bible. I think that the bible itself contains a dialogue (or maybe an argument) between this view of a dis-satisfied God who rewards and punishes, and on the other hand a God of grace who is kind and full of compassion. There is also an argument in the bible about whether God has favourites or cares equally for all creation. I have decided to read the bible through the lens of Psalm 145.8 and see what happens. I think this is more in tune with the revelation of grace I see in Jesus, and I want to follow him.

The LORD is kind and full of compassion. But this doesn't imply softness on God's part. A hard edge comes in to vv.14-20. God is especially concerned for those who are broken and bowed down. God provides for every living thing (and it's important to remember that in this psalm, all creatures are subjects of God's faithfulness and compassion, not just humans). But it's obvious that the world does not reflect that universal grace of God, so when v.20 speaks of God destroying the wicked, we have not abandoned the idea of God being kind and full of compassion. It is precisely because God is full of compassion that God needs to act against those who persist in depriving others of their food or other basic needs, and against those who make other beings fall and who bow others down. In v.19, God hears the cries of these victims of greed and oppression and God saves them. What is the desire of a bird who can't find a mate because there are so few of their species left? What is the desire of a starving polar bear unable to range widely for food because there is too little ice? How is God to fulfill those desires? How is God to save the oppressed without doing something about the oppressor? In v.17, we read:

The LORD is just in all his ways,
and kind in all his doings.

Hebrew poetry often uses a device known as parallelism, where two statements come at one idea in two parallel expressions. In this verse, therefore, God's justice is in parallel with God's kindness. How could it be otherwise when the world is broken and too many of God's creatures, all of whom are the subjects of God's compassion (v.9), suffer? I think of the two nails that held Jesus' hands to the cross as symbolizing God's justice on the one hand and God's kindness on the other hand. They are two views of the same thing, and if seen in the hands of the crucified Christ, we can see how very seriously God takes being kind and full of compassion toward all that God has made. In order to save the oppressed, God needs to save the oppressors and in Jesus I have a way to be saved, changed, and made new in the great grace and compassion of God. I need to be in the flow of God's kindness and justice, with my life honouring God by being full of the same practical compassion for all that God has made.

The psalm finishes with the psalmist's wish to speak the praise of God, and for all flesh to bless God's holy name for ever (v.21). I began by saying that this is an acrostic poem, each verse beginning with the successive 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, but the psalm ends at v.21. One letter is missing! It is the letter *nun*. There are two options. One is that suggested by Robert Alter, that the *nun* verse was accidentally omitted by scribes during the process leading up to the ninth-century CE Masoretic Text used by modern translators. Alter says that a text of the psalm from the Dead Sea Scrolls and a medieval Hebrew manuscript contain the missing verse: "Trustworthy is God in all his ways, and faithful in all his deeds" (v.13b in NRSV). This is nice and neat and could well be true. On the other hand, sometimes a poet deliberately disobeys the strict rules of the form, for example jarring the rhythm. They may do this to make the reader sit up and take notice, or perhaps to make the form emphasise the particular content at that point, or simply because rules are there to be broken. What if the *nun* verse in Psalm 145 is missing deliberately? If an acrostic is meant to symbolize completeness and it's missing a letter's verse, the reader had better add their own verse to complete the poem. The praises of creation, the praise given to the one, great God are incomplete without my praises and so I must take seriously the sentiments of vv.1-2 and 21, and let my mouth speak the praise of God, and indeed my whole life express that God is kind and full of compassion for all creation. What would you add to make this psalm of praise complete?

Ideas For Praying With Psalm 145

Outdoors

On a walk, or sitting in your sit spot (see introduction), see how many different types of plant or animal you can see. You don't need to know their names, you just need to pay enough attention to notice differences. Let one in particular 'call' out to you for attention. Focus on that living being and try to feel compassion for it. Ask, what is its desire? Psalm 145.16 says that God satisfies the desire of every living thing. Bring the creature to God in prayer as if you are its advocate before God. Ask God to show you how you can express God's care. If you want to, and when you feel ready, let something else draw your attention and repeat the exercise. To conclude, thank God for caring for you, and tell God the desire of your heart. Then share that prayer with the creatures you have been focusing on, as a way of connecting with them, alongside them, in worship of God.

Indoors

Write an acrostic psalm of praise. On a piece of paper, write the alphabet vertically along the left-hand side. Then for each letter, write a statement of praise in relation to God in creation. The statement doesn't need to begin with the letter but should at least have a key word that does. Reserve your own initial for something you contribute towards caring for creation. As the Hebrew alphabet has only 22 letters, feel free to omit up to 4 English letters if you're struggling.

Prayer

To be prayed with empty hands

Eternal God, majestic in splendour,
beyond all measure, beyond all praise;
when I have said all that can be said –
when I have come to the end of me,
there is always more of you.

Fill me with your fullness.

Eternal God, gracious and merciful,
full of compassion for all you have made;
when I have done all that can be done –
when I have come to the end of me,
there is always more of you.

Fill me with your fullness.

Eternal God, whose kingdom endures,
whose deeds are told through generations;
when I have heard all that can be heard –
when I have come to the end of me,
there is always more of you.

Fill me with your fullness.

Eternal God, praised by every creature,
blessed by all that lives;
when I have dismantled every division I can dismantle –
when I have come to the end of me,
there is always more of you.

Fill me with your fullness.

Eternal God, who upholds all who fall,
and raises up all who are bowed down;
when I have cared all that I can care –
when I have come to the end of me,
there is always more of you.

Fill me with your fullness.

Eternal God, just and kind,
fulfilling the desire of every creature;
when I have asked all that I can ask –
when I have come to the end of me,
there is always more of you.

Fill me with your fullness.

I am mortal, dust, only human.
You are eternal, endless, enormously God.
Help me not to accept easy limits
nor try to be greater than I am;
but with empty hands and with space in my soul,
may I rest in your greatness,
be filled with your fullness,
and live in your life.
And when I come to the end of me,
there will always be more of you –
God, who makes all things complete.
Amen.

Collect

God of goodness and mercy,
full of compassion for all you have made;
grant us grace,
that our mouths may speak your praise
and our deeds show your kindness to all;
through Jesus Christ, word made flesh,
in whom all creation becomes complete
and gives you glory.
Amen.