

Praising God in the Valleys

By Nathan Warner

God desires praise at all times. Three Hebrew words often translated as “praise” mean to “give thanks, confess, to sing praise, honor, or commend.” All these meanings contain the idea of acknowledging God’s hand in your life for good, regardless of what your present circumstances are.

Unfortunately, the modern re-interpretation of the Gospel as a “self-help” tool in this present life has twisted much of the Church’s worship and praise. The vast majority of what is called “praise” music today is less influenced by the Word of God as by positive thinking — “A positive person anticipates happiness, health and success, and believes he or she can overcome any obstacle and difficulty” (www.successconsciousness.com). Positive thinking Christians see God more as a helpful insurance policy that they pay into with praise, good-deeds, and church attendance and who they get benefits and rewards out of. They don’t see God as their Lord and Savior, and there is no expectation that they will face trials or endure suffering for “signing up.” This has transformed the Church’s worship, cheapening the Gospel because it avoids the unmarketable reality of the Believer’s call to “*suffer with [Christ] so that we may also be glorified with Him*” (Romans 8:17b NASB). This is why hymns like “It is Well with My Soul” or “Take My Life and Let It Be” help us to praise God from a place of understanding the trials and the costs of our faith, unlike the repetitious praise worship that makes us excited, positive, and emotional for a few minutes but does not rise from a humility where we understand we have come to the end of ourselves. This is a problem because suffering and praise are necessarily intertwined for the Believer in this life.

A good question to ask yourself is “What is the testimony to the Gospel of this music?” Contrasted to many modern praise songs, the old hymns are often more closely tied to Scripture. These songs of praise and worship are a testimony to the Word of God, and God said His Word “*will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire*” (Isaiah 55:11).

If you were to turn on the radio and tune to a Christian station, you’ll likely find that many of these praise songs are drowned in “mood-enhancing” instruments, they are short on Scriptural substance, and they deliver a shallow, “feel-good” message repeated over and over again as if to make it more “true.” These songs lift us up on the warmth of an emotional experience. The problem is that as soon as the song is over, our eyes sink down to earth again. This shouldn’t surprise us because just like a hot-air balloon, it’s a bunch of hot air with no substance. These sorts of songs are designed to recreate an “experience” for people whose hearts “just aren’t into it.” Their praise isn’t coming from a spring of living water in their hearts – instead, it’s like a drug that eventually wears off because your body doesn’t make the chemical. If you read the songs of Deborah, Moses, Mary, David, and the Elders in Heaven (Revelation 5), you will notice a difference – they know what God has saved them from and you can feel it!

Many modern praise songs do not address the richness of our salvation or the cost of our faith. They do not lift our eyes to Christ in any meaningful way. Instead, they appeal to the immature Believer who has not faced the steeply descending road into “*the valley of the shadow of death*” (Psalm 23:4) or endured “*a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of satan to torment me*” (2 Corinthians 12:7) or asked “*Why did I ever come forth from the womb To look on trouble and sorrow, So that my days have been spent in shame?*” (Jeremiah 20:18) Yet, these very words were spoken by faithful Believers who praised God up to the very end.

David, Paul, and Jeremiah knew that the walk of the Faithful in the world is not a rose-petal

road of songbird soundtracks. Every Believer who has walked a distance on the pathway of Sanctification knows it. We know from the Scriptures that there were terrible trials and difficulties even for those who are best remembered for having *“conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight”* (Hebrews 11:33-34), just as many Believers *“were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground”* (Hebrews 11:35b-38). Scripture is clear that the Believer will suffer for Christ’s name: *“For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ”* (2 Corinthians 1:5).

Suffering in the world is seen as a problem, a disease – something that needs to be fixed. It reminds people of all that they fear and that the world is indeed fallen. Suffering is not reserved for Christians: *“The whole creation groans”* (Romans 8:22), and the world is always searching for a way of life, a fix, or a cure that will make the suffering go away or explain it as something they can overcome. They jump back and forth between teachings of “self-empowerment” and invest their money in “cures” for their present life. And if these don’t work, there is an infinite array of drugs to numb you to the reality of your pain.

To the world, trials and suffering are seen as something to “power through” with the will of your human spirit, but the Believer is told in Scripture that our lives will be marked by suffering and trials for Jesus’ name. We are also told to praise God. How can these two be reconciled? After all, we don’t always feel like praising Him – I know I don’t. We can get distracted, discontent, frustrated, maybe even ungrateful, but we are commanded to *“Praise the Lord in song, for He has done excellent things; Let this be known throughout the earth”* (Isaiah 12:5).

But when do we offer Him praise? Much of the praise men give to God is for the blessings they receive from Him when they receive them from Him. They raise their voices to acknowledge His goodness when they receive good things from Him. Is this wrong? Of course not, but this is not the end of praise for a Believer: *“Through [Jesus] then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name”* (Hebrews 13:15). To praise God for good things we receive is no sacrifice on our part – it is our duty to acknowledge God’s provision. We don’t normally think to praise God when we aren’t in receipt of blessing. We don’t think to give Him glory when we are struggling or suffering. Yet, Paul and Silas give us a different example. They praised God after they had been slandered in Macedonia, wrongly arrested, severely beaten, and were languishing in a prison with no hope of a positive conclusion to the ordeal: *“But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them”* (Acts 16:25).

How is that possible? How can people praise God in the midst of pain and suffering? The simple answer is that they recognize the immeasurable, unquantifiable value of their eternal Salvation. They understand that a price tag cannot be put upon it. They understand that nothing can be worth more than life eternal with God. *“Sing to the Lord, praise the Lord! For He has delivered the soul of the needy one from the hand of evildoers”* (Jeremiah 20:13). Though we are often distressed and we toil and struggle and suffer in this life, God will deliver our souls from the influence of evil – its grip cannot hold us, and we will be caught up to reign with Christ

for all the ages of eternity – this is the Gospel for a Believer.

The problem with the worldly church's praise is a misunderstanding of what the Gospel is. The Gospel isn't a magic spell promising all your problems to go away. The Gospel is "*the Power of God*" (1 Corinthians 1:18b) that is doing a work in you that will be revealed in eternity, for eternity. If you don't understand that, then you don't understand the Gospel and you are not following Christ.

Suffering puts the Gospel in perspective. I remember when I was a teen my dad would shake his head at the world and say, "Christ is going to destroy this place when He returns, and He's going to rule it with a rod of iron." I would look at the sunrise and feel the strength in my young body and a world of opportunities at my feet and wonder what was wrong with his coffee. I would think, "Yeah, but people are pretty good, the air is fresh and crisp, and I can do so much!" I hadn't matured enough to experience the trials that tarnish all the joys of the flesh and the pride of life. I wasn't looking at the present world with a gaze destined for eternity. Eternity changes everything. If your eyes aren't on eternity, then your eyes aren't on God.

Peter gives us some more insight into how we can praise God from a place of suffering: "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. **In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ***" So, though we suffer now, the proof of our faith will result in praise and glory in the end. But is that it? No, let's read on: "*And though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory*" (1 Peter 1:3-8). Beyond simply enduring now until we can praise God once we've received our inheritance, we are to rejoice and praise God NOW – in the suffering without sight of the promise. We are to praise God in the faith of His unseen promise to us.

For "*faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*" (Hebrews 11:1) – those things hoped for but not seen are the bright treasures of our inheritance in Christ that He promised to us. As Believers we know we have been saved from our sins and eternal separation from God. We have an assurance that "*the Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him*" (Romans 8:16-17), for God has "*qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light*" (Colossians 1:12b) to inherit a "*city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God*" (Hebrews 11:10b), which is "*the promise of the eternal inheritance*" (Hebrews 9:15). This is why no matter what Believers endure, they can "*continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name*" (Hebrews 13:15b), praising God right now for His mercy and love and also for our inheritance in Him and His gifts, even though we cannot see it clearly – because He has promised it!

This doesn't mean we can't petition God or cry out to Him from the anguish of our tormented souls. Of course we can – Scripture is very clear about that (look to the Psalms). And we will go through many days where we cannot but cry out to Him in anguish, pain, or frustration. Yet, we must always remember that the Believer has a higher calling than to simply praise God for

the good they see around them or the good they experience in this life. The Believer praises God for His character, His mercy, and His Salvation no matter how their lives are going. In this way, the Believer never ceases to offer up praises to God, because though they suffer now, they will be glorified with Christ later. May we praise God from our hearts, and may we live our lives praising God! Amen.