

Psalm 146 – Jess Chambers

Psalm 146

*Hallelujah! Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, O my soul.*

This may have been obvious to everyone else, but I've only just realized that *Praise the Lord* or *Hallelujah* is an imperative. I think I'd always read it as more of an exclamation, like when my grandma says, "Well, praise God!" when the Easter pies turn out. But it's an instruction: "Go do this: praise the Lord."

Psalm 146 is the first in a series of psalms that closes out the Psalter, all of which begin and end with *Hallelujah*. And their middles are all pretty similar, too. Full of ideas about God as a powerful Creator, a sovereign ruler, and a benevolent defender of people.

It's a bit repetitive, if I'm honest.

*Hallelujah! Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, O my soul.*

The more I hear it, the more the psalmist makes this demand of me, the more annoyed I am by it. I wanna say, "Back off, ok? I get it. Praise God. Will do. It's on my list," but at the same time, I'm wondering why? Why would I do that?

Why would I not trust in human rulers, in mere mortals? God didn't come pick up my dog and me from Durham. God didn't offer up God's own attic apartment for me to crash in. God hasn't been feeding me and paying my bills and helping me pick out my interview clothes. Mere mortals have performed those miracles. Their help is immediate and obvious. I can see and touch and speak to them. Why would I trust anything other than that? What has God done?

I have watched friends fight for the legal right and lives of POC, queer and trans people, prisoners, immigrants. And some of the first WOC and queer people have been elected into public office, people have been and hopefully will continue feeding people and protecting people. What has God done?

There's that caravan of migrants headed our way and who knows what's gonna happen when they get here. Many things about the midterm election are wildly concerning. Like half of California is on fire. And I've just completed what is possibly the least marketable master's degree available. On a personal and a corporate level, nothing is good and everything is bad. What is God going to do about it?

When will God release the prisoners, feed the hungry, guard the sojourners? People are imprisoned, in danger, and hungry now. People need help right now.

*Hallelujah! Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, O my soul.*

It feels insulting. People are suffering and you want me to waste my time praising God? I'm baffled. So maybe there's something for us in all that repetition in the middles.

*Happy whose help is Jacob's God, his hope - for the Lord is his God.*

*Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and of all that is in them, who keeps faith forever.*

*The Lord guards sojourners, orphan and widow he sustains, but the way of the wicked contorts.*

*The Lord shall reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Hallelujah.*

The language used in this and the following psalms sounds familiar, because it's language that is repeated, not only throughout the Psalter, but throughout the entire Hebrew Bible. This psalm recalls all of the ways in which God has proven Godself to be trustworthy. God guided Israel out of Egypt. God defeated the Philistines and their giant, Goliath. God saved the Jews from certain death by Haman.

Maybe you're thinking, "Well, actually, Moses guided God's people, David defeated Goliath, and Esther saved the Jews."

And you're not wrong. Because just as we trust God, God trusts us. God can't always just swoop down and fix things. Yes, sometimes God seems to be capable of keeping meal and oil from running dry, without our help, but more often than not, things turn out best when we work with God. I suspect that God also had something to do with my being brought back home, to this, the promised land. God provided pillars of smoke and fire, but Moses had to lead the people. God provided a few pebbles, but David had to pick up his sling. God put Esther in power, but Esther had to put her people's lives before her own security. God's powerful work in this world requires our participation.

And there are always going to be people in need of God's work; there will always be poor people, sick people, hungry people, people who need help.

Human beings can certainly offer help. But human beings are shockingly incapable of learning from their mistakes. And we get tired of doing what is right, and we hurt people. And human beings die. Our breath departs, we return to dust, and our plans are naught.

Not God. The Lord shall reign forever, for all generations. God keeps faith forever. God does not falter, as human rulers do. God doesn't waffle or flip flop or offer empty promises. God is always there, ready to do God's share of the work.

But I am tired. I am tired of doing my share of the work. And sometimes it feels like I'm stuck doing someone else's share on top of mine, but still, it's not enough. There are so many oppressed and hungry people—too many.

How do I keep trusting God? I can see reason for it; I have evidence to suggest that it's a good idea to trust God. But how, when I'm so tired? I can only reason myself into so much. Mostly, I know that to trust in myself and my friends and our leaders more than I trust in God will lead to disappointment. Mostly, I know that, but it's hard to believe it, really, to feel like that is true, when there is so much messed up stuff happening.

*Hallelujah! Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, O my soul.*

This is a demand on us to praise. But maybe we can also read it as a plea from us to God. Please, God, remind us of who you are, of why you are worthy of our praise. Do something here and now, as you have always done and have promised to do. Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.

We gather. We sing and we recite and we pray. And we remember who God is. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God of Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel. The God of the saints. This God is our God; the God of Ruth and Judy and Rick and Ben and on and on.

Our songs and prayers keep us believing that God is who God has been, is now, and will be forever.

Our praise is a means of resistance. They help us resist hopelessness and exhaustion, so that we do not grow weary in doing what is right. Praise gives us hope; it empowers us.

Our praise is a means of resistance, because it calls us to action. To say that we belong to God and God belongs to us, means that we are willing to participate in God's good and powerful work in this world. As long as we live and breathe we, with God's help, provide for the poor, feed the hungry, and protect the sojourner.

Praise is imperative, not only because God is worthy of our praise, but because there is holy power in our praise.

*Hallelujah! Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, O my soul.*