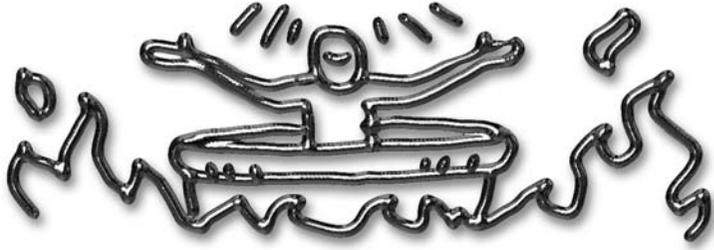


A Life of Praise



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Josh. 5:13–6:20, 2 Chron. 20:1–30, Psalm 145, Acts 16:16–34, Phil. 4:4–7.*

Memory Text: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (*Philippians 4:4, NIV*).

It's always easy to shout with joy to the Lord when we feel joy. It's not so easy, however, when things are bad, when we are in the worst situations imaginable, when the crucible tightens. Yet, it's precisely then that we need, perhaps, more than ever to praise God, for praise is a means of helping us sustain faith.

Indeed, praise can transform even our darkest circumstances, maybe not in the sense of its changing the facts around us, but in the sense that it can change us, and those around us, in a way that helps us face challenges.

Praise is faith in action. It may not always be natural to us, but when we practice praise so that it becomes a natural part of our lives, it has the power both to convert and conquer.

The Week at a Glance: What is praise? How could praise be such a powerful spiritual weapon in difficult circumstances? How can praise transform us and the situation around us?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 1.*

Framework for Praise

The great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevski had been sentenced to death, only to have the sentence commuted at the last moment. He spent years in prison instead. Talking about his prison experience, he wrote: “Believe to the end, even if all men go astray and you are left the only one faithful; bring your offering even then and praise God in your loneliness.”

In these lessons we have already seen how Paul endured incredible opposition and persecution. But now he is sitting in a Roman prison. But he is not depressed; instead, he is eagerly writing to encourage the believers in Philippi!

Read Philippians 4:4–7. **How do you think Paul could have written such things when he himself was sitting in a prison? What are the keys in this verse to gaining the “peace of God”?**

It is one thing to rejoice when everything is going well. But Paul exhorts us to rejoice always. That may sound strange. If we take what Paul writes literally, there are two critical implications for us.

First, if we are to rejoice always, it must mean that we should be rejoicing even when circumstances do not appear to give any grounds for rejoicing. Second, if we are to rejoice always, it must also mean that we are going to have to learn to rejoice at times when we do not feel like it.

Paul is calling us to praise God even though many times it may seem quite unnatural to us. It may even seem unreasonable. But as we will see, it is precisely because there are times where it appears unreasonable that we are called to rejoice. In other words, praise is an act of faith. Just as faith is based not on our circumstances but rather on the truth about God, so praise is something we do, not because we feel good, but because of the truth of who God is and what He has promised us. And amazingly, it is such faith that begins to shape our thoughts, feelings, and circumstances.

What is the truth about God that Paul identifies in today’s text—truth that enables him to rejoice, even in prison? Write down a short list of what you know to be the truth about God. Go through the list and praise God for each item. How does this change the way that you feel about and view your circumstances?

I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .

► **Key Text:** *Philippians 4:4*

► **Teach the Class to:**

Know: Praise is not something we do when we think of it or feel like it; it is a way of life that we must cultivate.

Feel: A realization that God is the source of all our needs, which will lead to a genuine desire to praise God.

Do: Allow our praise of God to penetrate our daily lives and give us courage that we otherwise might not possess.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. A Life of Praise (*Phil. 4:4–7*)

A Does God need us to praise Him, or is the praise more for our own benefit? Why does God want our praise?

B When Christians refer to praise, they usually mean something specific that takes place in a church service. How does the biblical concept of praise go beyond this?

C How does praise transform our reaction to our circumstances?

II. Rejoice Always (*Acts 16:16–34*)

A Why should we rejoice always? Is everything that happens to us God’s will?

B If everything that happens to us isn’t necessarily God’s will, how can praise to God transform events or situations?

C Is it sometimes necessary to discipline ourselves to praise God when things seem to be going well?

III. Praise and Reality (*2 Chron. 20:1–30*)

A Why is it beneficial to express praise of God verbally?

B How can our outwardly expressed praise affect those around us?

C Have you ever been in a situation that appeared to have been changed directly and dramatically for the better by your praise of God?

► **Summary:** God wants our praise, because praising Him helps us to remain mindful of our relationship to Him. Whatever occurs in your world, continue to praise God and watch its impact on your attitude and environment.

Praying Down Walls

There's an expression in English: "to be painted into a corner." Imagine painting the floor of a room but then realizing that you have wound up in a corner and cannot get out—except by walking over the fresh paint. You have to stay there until it dries!

Sometimes our faith seems to paint us into a corner. We arrive at a situation, and, like the wet paint on the floor, our faith "traps" us. We look at the situation and either have to reject God, faith, and everything we have believed in, or our faith compels us to believe what appears impossible.

God brought the Israelites to a corner. After they had wandered for 40 years in the wilderness, God did not lead His people to empty, peaceful grasslands. God led them to one of the most strongly fortified cities in the whole area. Then they had to walk around Jericho in silence for six days. On the seventh day God told them to shout—and that shouting, together with the trumpets, would bring victory.

Read Joshua 5:13–6:20. What is God trying to teach the Israelites?

Shouting loudly was not going to cause vibrations to trigger the walls to collapse. When God called the Israelites to "shout," it was the same type of shouting that David writes about in Psalm 66: "Shout with joy to God, all the earth! Sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious!" (*vss. 1, 2, NIV*). This shouting was praise! After six days of looking at the huge walls, they must have concluded that they hadn't a chance of breaking them down themselves.

How does this idea help us understand the meaning of Hebrews 11:30?

When God is on the verge of doing something new in our lives, He may bring us to a Jericho, for He may need to teach us that the power to triumph does not come in our own strength and strategies. Everything we need comes from outside ourselves. So, no matter what is in front of us, no matter how insurmountable it may seem, our role is to praise God—the source of everything we need. This is faith in action.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Just for Teachers: Step 1 of the Natural Learning Cycle links the learners' experiences to the lesson. Help your class members answer the question, *Why is this lesson important to me?*

There is a tendency among modern people to treat life as nothing more than a series of problems to be solved—preferably by means of power and force. For example:

When they feel they've been treated unfairly, some contact a lawyer and investigate filing a lawsuit, rather than trying to talk it through with the people involved.

When sick, patients often opt for surgery, even if the problem could be solved by simpler means.

When one country threatens others, more powerful countries often answer its threats with military force, rather than first attempting mediation.

There is an appropriate place for each of these responses, of course. Yet, Scripture suggests that Christians have a larger repertoire of responses to choose from. To meet life's problems with praise and prayer seems the oddest of these to people accustomed to relying upon power and force. Yet, praise is a powerful, optimistic response and one whose power to effect change often is underestimated.

Consider This: How would the world be different if everyone saw life's challenges as opportunities to praise God?

► **STEP 2—Explore!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the Natural Learning Cycle presents information learners can use to help them better understand the lesson. Help your class members answer this question, *What do I need to know from God's Word?*

Bible Commentary

I. Framework for Praise

(Read Philippians 4:4–7.)

Praise, thanksgiving, and prayer as strategies to meet life's difficulties appear of little value to the power-seeking, problem-solving mind. Yet, in

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The Life of Praise

Praising the Lord might not be natural to us, even in good circumstances. Thus, how much more difficult to do it in bad ones? Yet, that is what we are called to do. Praise is something that must be practiced until it changes from being an activity done at a particular time to an atmosphere in which we live. Praise shouldn't so much be a specific act but a specific way of life itself.

Read Psalm 145. What are the reasons David gives for praising God? In what ways should the words of this psalm be your own?

The great British preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote a book called *The Practice of Praise*. It is based on verse 7 of today's psalm. In this short verse, Spurgeon calls our attention to three important things that can help in developing praise in our lives.

1. Praise is practiced as we look around us. If we do not look around us to see the greatness of God, we will have no reason to praise Him. What can you see in the created world that is praiseworthy, such as the beauty of God's creation? What can you see in the spiritual world that is praiseworthy, such as the growing faith in a young Christian?

2. Praise is practiced as we remember what we have seen. If we want to live in an atmosphere of praise, we must be able to recall the reason for it. In what ways can we remember the great things about God, so that His goodness and the truth about Him do not slip from our minds (such as developing new rituals or symbols that remind us of His goodness)?

3. Praise is practiced as we talk about it. Praise is not something that we do in our heads. It is meant to come out of our mouths, to be heard by those around us. What reasons can you think of to praise God verbally? What will the effect of such praise be, and on whom?

Take a pen and some paper and spend some time working through these three points. What can you do to develop the habit of praise in your life?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

addition to enlisting heaven's energies on our behalf, they are the foundation of a distinctly Christian attitude. For in shifting the exercise of power from us to God, Christians are freed to manifest a determined and unmistakable *gentleness* (vs. 5, *NIV*). The Greek word (*epieikes*) connotes generosity, magnanimity, and even a willingness to yield to others. In 2 Corinthians 10:1, Paul attributes gentleness as a central quality of Christ's personality.

Consider This: Give an example of gentleness being more effective in solving a problem than more conventional means.

II. Praying Down Walls

God's sanctioning the killing of whole tribes is a legitimate theological difficulty in the story of Jericho's collapse (*Joshua 5:13f-6:27*). In this discussion, however, try to keep the class focused on the interpretation of the story offered in Hebrews 11:30, an example of God doing the heavy work in response to His people's faith, praise, and prayer.

III. The Life of Praise

Psalm 145 is known to Hebrew readers as the *tehillah of David*, meaning David's praise. While many psalms have notes of praise, the *tehillah* is noteworthy in its lofty, artistic development of this theme. (For more on this psalm, see Step 3—Practice!)

IV. A Witness That Convicts

(Read *Acts 16:24, 25*.)

The striking thing about verse 25 is not simply that the apostles were singing and praying while imprisoned but the offhand, matter-of-fact way in which it is mentioned. The rapid juxtaposition of arrest with singing and praise suggests that the writer of Acts was so used to this kind of behavior from the apostles that it is not terribly noteworthy to him. To modern people, accustomed to prayer as a private exercise, the apostles' lack of bashfulness reminds us that praise for God is something we can do publicly, even when surrounded by those who may not share our convictions.

Consider This: What do people hear from you when you're going through hard times? Complaints, or praise?

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A Witness Who Convicts

In the book of Acts, praise had an astonishing effect on those who heard it. Read Acts 16:16–34. Having been stripped and beaten hard, Paul and Silas were thrown into prison. No one was there to put ointment on their badly cut and bruised backs. In great physical pain and with their feet in stocks, they were placed in the darkness of the inner prison. But as the other prisoners sat listening, Paul and Silas begin to pray and sing.

After the earthquake, and after the jailer had discovered that neither Paul nor Silas nor any of the other prisoners had escaped, he “fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’” (*vss. 29, 30, NIV*).

Why did this event cause the jailer to focus on his own need of salvation? What role do you think Paul’s and Silas’s prayers and songs played in the prisoners’ not running away, and in the conversion of this man and his whole family?

It is amazing to think that our praise can transform the eternal destinies of those around us. If Paul and Silas had sat in the dark mumbling and complaining as prisoners often do, do you think anyone would have been saved that night?

We don’t know what happened to the jailer and his family later on, but can you imagine them reading the words that Paul later wrote from another prison in Rome: “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have” (*Phil. 1:29, 30, NIV*). If they did read this and reflected on how Paul’s suffering had brought them joy, it surely must have brought a song to their hearts and a fresh challenge to remain faithful, no matter the cost.

Who do you think could be influenced for God by a song of praise that could come from your heart? Make a concerted effort to be more open and effusive in your praise to God around others. You don’t know the positive effect it could have.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**V. A Weapon That Conquers**

Recount the main points of Jehoshaphat's battle in 2 Chronicles 20:1–30.

This story, like that of the fall of Jericho, shows that praise and prayer do not imply passivity; in both cases God expected cooperative action on the part of those praying for help.

► STEP 3—Practice!

Just for Teachers: This step of the Natural Learning Cycle will assist you in helping your class members find the answer to the following question: **How can I practice the information I just learned?**

Class Activity: Praise is a part of the spiritual life that is better understood in practice than by theological analysis. Today lead your class in some shared praise activities.

1 Enlist class members in performing a dramatic reading of Psalm 145. Rather than simply mumbling through it—as often happens with Scripture readings—coach the class in an enthusiastic, praiseful, choral responsive reading. (You may wish to use number 705 in *The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, a shorter version of the psalm.) If you have access to someone with acting or drama-coaching experience, have them assist you in performing the choral reading with suitable emotions and gestures.

2 Have the class write personal praise psalms to share. You may provide a template such as this:

Lord, You are (list qualities of God)

In this world, You have (include acts and signs of God observable to all)

I praise You that in my life, You have (describe personal signs of God in your life)

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A Weapon That Conquers

Read 2 Chronicles 20:1–30. As Jehoshaphat discovered, praise is a powerful weapon. After receiving the report that a “vast army” was coming against him, Jehoshaphat did not immediately jump to military action but “resolved to inquire of the Lord” (vs. 3, *NIV*). As the people of Judah came to Jerusalem for a fast, Jehoshaphat admitted the reality of the situation, saying that “ ‘we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you’ ” (vs. 12, *NIV*).

When you see a “vast army” approaching, what is your instinctive reaction? From Jehoshaphat’s response in verses 3–12, what can you learn about dealing with overwhelming opposition?

As the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel, he boldly announced: “ ‘ “You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give you, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the Lord will be with you” ’ ” (vs. 17, *NIV*). After that, they worshiped God and sang praises to Him “with very loud voice” (vs. 19, *NIV*). Even though God was going to fight for them, they still had to go out to face the enemy.

But this was no ordinary march to war. Jehoshaphat appointed a choir to sing praises to the Lord as they marched out. “As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated” (vs. 22, *NIV*). According to the author, God intervened at the very moment they exercised their faith in His promise, as they began to “praise him for the splendor of his holiness” (vs. 21, *NIV*).

Read through the texts for today again. What spiritual principles can you find there that can be applied to your own walk with God, especially in times of trial and stress?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

In the future, I know that I can trust You to (list expectations of God's actions in your life or in the world)

Remember that David wrote in the language and idioms of his day about current events, and from a personal point of view. Ask class members to avoid stained-glass language and Bible-sounding words in favor of very personal, modern reasons to praise God.

► STEP 4—Apply!

Just for Teachers: In this fourth and final step of the Natural Learning Cycle, you will want to encourage class members to make a life response to the lesson. Help them answer this question, With God's help, what can I do with what I have learned from this lesson?

One of the greatest works of Christian devotion is Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions*. Written about four hundred years after Christ, it is the heartfelt account of Augustine's journey to God, which led to his becoming one of the early church's most influential evangelists and theologians. He begins the *Confessions* with praise—specifically, with a quotation from Psalm 145:

“You are great, O Lord, and greatly to be praised: great is your power and to your wisdom there is no limit. And man, who is a part of your creation, wishes to praise you, man who bears about within himself his mortality, who bears about within himself testimony to his sin and testimony that you resist the proud. Yet man, this part of your creation, wishes to praise you. You arouse him to take joy in praising you, for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”—*The Confessions of St. Augustine*, book 1, chap. 1, vss. 1–3 (New York: Image Books, 1960), p. 43.

According to Augustine, prayer arises naturally when we reflect on our own mortality, sinfulness, pride, and need for God. To Augustine, praise was the essential first step in spiritual growth.

Consider This: Psalm 22:26 says that “they who seek the Lord will praise him” (*NIV*). If you've ever felt that your relationship with God was lacking something, consider the possibility that the missing element is systematic and sincere praise.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Jehoshaphat,” pp. 190–203, in *Prophets and Kings*; “The Fall of Jericho,” pp. 487–498, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“Then let us educate our hearts and lips to speak the praise of God for His matchless love. Let us educate our souls to be hopeful and to abide in the light shining from the cross of Calvary. Never should we forget that we are children of the heavenly King, sons and daughters of the Lord of hosts. It is our privilege to maintain a calm repose in God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 253.

“And while I adore and magnify Him, I want you to magnify Him with me. Praise the Lord even when you fall into darkness. Praise Him even in temptation. ‘Rejoice in the Lord alway,’ says the apostle; ‘and again I say, Rejoice.’ Will that bring gloom and darkness into your families? No, indeed; it will bring a sunbeam. You will thus gather rays of eternal light from the throne of glory and scatter them around you. Let me exhort you to engage in this work, scatter this light and life around you, not only in your own path, but in the paths of those with whom you associate. Let it be your object to make those around you better, to elevate them, to point them to heaven and glory, and lead them to seek, above all earthly things, the eternal substance, the immortal inheritance, the riches which are imperishable.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, pp. 593, 594.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What role does community praise have in the life of the Christian? How would you describe the praise in your Sabbath services? Is it uplifting? Does it encourage members to maintain faithfulness amid trial and trauma? If not, what can be done?
- ❷ What does it mean to “praise the Lord even when you fall into darkness” or to “praise Him even in temptation”? How can praise help us through these situations?
- ❸ Let members give testimonies on how praise has affected their lives. What can you learn from each other’s experiences?
- ❹ As a class, pick a psalm of praise and spend time reading it. What does it teach you about praise? What impact does praise have on your faith?