

My father had a small boat that we used for waterskiing. I skied a lot behind that boat and normally stopped skiing when I was tired or took a fall. Getting back in the boat was always difficult:

There were places you could grab on the back of the boat – metal loops used for hooking things.

- There was a flat piece on the motor's powertrain where you could step.
- But when you are so tired and the boat tends to bounce around, you could easily slip and cut yourself on the propeller or powertrain.

The best way into the boat was for someone to grab your hand and give you a few seconds to find a foothold and then have them pull you up. Perhaps you have been given a hand and a gentle pull up the corporate ladder.

Today's word picture is of God lifting us up.

This summer the pastors each took a turn preaching on their favorites Psalm.

- Their help has enabled me to enjoy a vacation and prepare for the next year.
- Pastor Tony will preach in a couple of weeks the last Psalm of our Summer in the Psalms series.

Today, I am led to look at Psalm 113, Highs and Lows. This Psalm ministered to me deeply for many years. We will talk about that later.

- It was likely sung antiphonally – two choirs in a worship setting.¹
- A few weeks ago, we looked at Psalm 118. It was the final song that Jesus sang before the cross as he left the Upper Room. It was sung as the fourth cup of wine celebrated Passover.
- Today's Psalm was sung at the start of the Passover celebration, as a blessing over the first cup of wine. Psalms 113-118 are praise and thanksgiving Psalms (the Egyptian Hallel).



Psalm 113 Highs and Lows

¹ Nancy deClaisse-Walford, *NICOT The Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), p. 847.

Let's jump right in.

1. God on High, vv. 1-5.

'Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, you his servants; praise the name of the Lord. ²Let the name of the Lord be praised, both now and forevermore. ³From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised. ⁴The Lord is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens. ⁵Who is like the Lord our God, the One who sits enthroned on high (Ps 113:1-5 NIV)?'

Three things stand out here:

- Praise the Lord – 5x.
- The Name – 3x.
- God on high – 3x.

1. First regarding praise. We will not always feel God's presence because sometimes our praise is motivated or enhanced by our emotions, but emotions can deceive us. For example, we can feel that God has abandoned us when things are difficult.

- But praise also involves our minds and reason and we have our experience to remember. When we do not feel like praising God, we should override our negative emotions by knowledge of God's character and remembrance of his involvement in our lives. 'I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also (1Co 14:15 NASB).' Use your mind and words to express praise, even when we do not feel like it.
- Worship involves the physical – be it our vocal cords and words or the actions of resisting temptation. Therefore, sometimes when I don't feel like praising God, I move to the altar. God takes common things and makes them holy. Just like the cup and bread are common but become holy, so our movement towards God or lifting our hand becomes holy.

2. Second, regarding name. 'The ancient Israelites derived the personal name of God, YHWH,' by revelation. They believed by knowing his name, there was a special relationship with Him.

Before the Passover, Moses had a revelation of God calling out of the burning bush (Ex 3:3).

- Before Moses would go back to Egypt, he wanted to know God's name. 'God said to Moses, "I AM who I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you (Ex 13:14 NIV)."'

- In English that sounds kind of funny, but it mean the ‘self-existent one.’ He is the uncreated, almighty God, the one completely different from his creation.
- They were to carefully guard the use of that name. It is the third commandment: ‘You must not misuse the name of the Lord your God. The Lord will not let you go unpunished if you misuse his name (Ex 20:7 NLT).’

Before we look at the exalted and lofty nature of our God, I had two reasons for memorizing this. The phrase, ‘From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets (v. 3 NIV).’ Japan calls itself ‘the land of the rising sun.’ Meaning, the place where the day begins – similar thinking to Greenwich Mean Time – where time and the day begins. Very few worshiped God, so I memorized this as a call to prayer and to work hard.

These first three verses are an expansive call to worship.

- The opening of our service usually contains a call to worship using scripture, prayer, and some phrase like ‘Let’s worship the Lord our God,’ – meaning us who are gathered now.
- Muslims call out in the community; it is called the athan. They use a loudspeaker to call people to prayer five times a day.²
- But the living God does not need electrical amplification, another Psalm says that His voice calls the whole earth to praise (Ps 50:1). You were led here by the Holy Spirit.
- This is a call to praise from everywhere the sun shines, over ‘all the nations (v. 4).’

3. Regarding God on high. I have often heard secularists say that ‘god is nothing more than a human construct – we create god in our own image.’

- To a point, I’d agree: we project onto God our weaknesses, our confusion, our lack of trust, our fickleness, our selfishness, etc. Without revelation we imagine God in human categories.
- But God has revealed that He is different than us: he is powerful, has a plan, is trustworthy, is true, and is constantly thinking about us.

‘The Lord is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens. ⁵Who is like the Lord our God, the One who sits enthroned on high (Ps 113:4-5 NIV)?’

² Currently, loudspeakers are allowed in Dearborn, MI, Paterson, NJ, Astoria, NY, and Minneapolis, MN five times daily.

He is exalted; He is above the heavens; He is enthroned on high. This means He is different from you and me.

- Unknown Psalmist - 'For you, Lord, are the Most High over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods (Ps 97:9 NIV).' Our God is above all the political powers, all the ideologies and philosophies, and every idol that puffs itself up in place of God.
- Paul - 'God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, ¹⁶who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen (1Ti 6:15-16 NIV).' He is outside of time; He is our creator; He does not live in manmade temples or do our bidding.
- Elihu - 'How great is God—beyond our understanding (Job 36:26 NIV)!' We may project our weaknesses onto him, but that is not who He is – He is beyond our weak caricatures of Him.

God is not like us. He is perfect, holy, loving, and worthy of our reverence. He is the ultimate ruler:

- David – 'The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all (Ps 103:19 NIV).'

Now our singer turns makes his most important point.

2. God Looks, v. 6.

'Who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth (Ps 113:6 NIV).'

Do you recall the parable of the Good Samaritan? A priest and a Levite saw the man who had been robbed and beaten, but they walked on by. They saw but did not see. But the good Samaritan saw the man and took pity on him. He responded with compassion. That is the way God on high looks down on you and me.

- The prophet Isaiah affirms this concept: 'For this is what the high and exalted One says— he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite (Is 57:15 NIV)."'
- Even though God is high and exalted, he cares for you and me.

This is the key sentence in the Psalm. God Almighty stoops down to engage with you and me. Just like an adult would stoop down and engage a child at eye level.

I'd like to pause today's message here and let you hear Jen Verlade-Brough's story

3. Jennifer Verlade-Brough's Testimony.

When Jen told me this, we were standing in a funeral home. The casket of a family member at one end of the room. There was no fear in her eyes, no agitation in her appearance, just a confidence that faith will see me through.

This psalm is really a prayer. It is not a petition but a prayer to remind God of His faithfulness towards His people.

4. Reversal for the Lowly, vv. 7-9.

'He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; ⁸he seats them with princes, with the princes of his people (Ps 113:7-8 NIV)!'

God is responsive to those who say, 'I need help.' There was a Canaanite woman whose daughter was demon possessed. She fell at Jesus' feet and said, 'Lord, help me (Mt 15:25 NIV)!' Jesus said he was called to serve Israel, but she pleaded for just a crumb of a miracle. Jesus said, 'You have great faith! Your request is granted (v. 28 NIV).'

God is a compassionate God who ...

- Reverses life's circumstances
- Renews the dreams of the hopeless.
- Restores the soul of lowly.

God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush because he looked down, saw Israel's suffering, and decided to set them free from slavery: 'I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries of distress because of their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. ⁸So I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own fertile and spacious land (Ex 3:7-8 NLT).'

- Not only is there the reversal, the rescue from slavery, there is a gift of their own land. A land as 'flowing with milk and honey (v. 8b).
- Our God is the same today for those who are humble, lowly, and who ask him for help.

The second reason I memorized this Psalm is that Connie and I were a childless couple for years. The final verse states: 'He settles the childless woman in her home as a happy mother of children. Praise the Lord (Ps 113:9 NIV).'

- Before computers, I had a bunch of business-card sized cards with prayer needs on them. I went through them every day and one of them listed the names of our hoped-for child(ren).
- We were childless for so long, in fact, that we had given up hope. I stopped praying for this child and stopped quoting this Psalm to him

Then one day, I came across it in my devotions and the Lord spoke to me.

- I had been quoting it all wrong. I was quoting it as a simile – a metaphor or word picture – using like or as: ‘even though we don’t have children, we would be happy and settled as if we had children.’
- That day in my office in Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo, overlooking Tokyo University, I read it with fresh eyes. My eyes opened by the Holy Spirit to God’s timing. It was a promise like the poor being raised to eat with princes, the childless will have children.
- It was like God saying ‘now.’ The next day I made the first inquiry to an adoption agency. It would take another 6/7 years before Annie was placed in Connie’s arms. We started saving every penny we had, and our hopes would be dashed several more times, but we held onto this verse as a promise. Our hope was renewed because God stoops down and lifts the lowly from their hopelessness.

I am quite sure of my new interpretation. Verses 7-8 (about God raising the poor from the dust and lifting the needy from the ash heap) is a direct quote from ... Hannah who was childless. It was her prayer of thanksgiving to God for her son Samuel, when she dedicated him to the Lord’s work (1Sa 1:8).³

Conclusion.

At this time, we are going to have a very general altar call. I know this message has touched many hearts in various ways. Musicians and prayer teams please get ready.

- Perhaps the Lord is stirring up faith for forgotten dream. God Almighty stoops down to engage with you and me.
- Perhaps you are ready to humble yourself before God.
- Perhaps you don’t know why you want prayer. That’s fine, God is calling you.

As they are preparing, I’d like to share two more passages with you.

- One the one hand, at the dedication of Israel’s Temple, Solomon prayed: ‘O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in all of heaven above or on the earth below. You keep your covenant and show unfailing love to all who walk before you in wholehearted devotion ...²⁷“But will God really live on earth? Why, even the highest heavens cannot contain you. How much less this Temple I have built (1Ki 8:23, 27 NLT)!’ This stresses God’s transcendence, is high and different from us.

³ Willem A. VanGemeren, in Frank El Gaebelein, ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 5* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), p. 715.

- On the other hand, Paul writes, 'Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you (1Co 3:16 NIV)? This stresses God's immanence, His ability to stoop down to engage with our lives. Indeed, to be so intimate with us, it is as if he lived inside of us.