

**“TOUCHING HEAVEN:
A PRAYER OF PRAISE”**

I Chronicles 29:10-13

Our relationship with God is built on praise.

A sermon preached by
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The foundation of our spiritual lives is prayer. The source of power for ministry and witness is prayer. The future success of First United Methodist Church of Fort Smith will continue to be, as it has been in the past, dependent on a supernatural empowerment that comes from God. So this summer, as we continue to seek spiritual revival in our church and community, and as we begin to make some strategic plans for our future, I want to look at some of the great prayers of the Bible. Though they are very old, they contain great insights for our walk with God today and tomorrow. This is the way we can touch heaven while standing on earth. Today I want to start this series with a prayer of praise.

I don't know if you have already made your vacation plans for the summer, but if you go anywhere near Nisswa, Minnesota, during the summer months, you can drop in on the Wednesday evening Nisswa Turtle Races. They've been doing this for over 50 years. People from Nisswa and the surrounding communities all gather at a designated parking lot for the weekly races.

It's big excitement and big business. Vendors sell turtles and turtle products (whatever those are). And the fans bring their lawn chairs early for the best viewing spots. In one recent race, there were 435 turtles competing in 15 heats over the course, which is six feet long.

When Biff, the turtle race announcer, shouts "Go!" the crowd goes into a frenzy. People shout and jump and cheer their favorite turtle on to victory. After all the heats are run, they have a championship race. When the winning turtle is determined, the winning "turtle wrangler" collects the \$5 prize money and the championship turtle necklace. And the normally reserved folks of northern Minnesota go wild again!¹

Isn't it incredible sometimes what gets people excited? Sporting events—I'm not sure if turtle races qualify as a sport—are always good candidates for excitement. Music, food, politics—people get excited about many different things.

People of faith have something to be excited about today. Maybe you don't think about your faith as something to cheer about, but we have good news to share. Praise is the first movement of prayer; it's the first step toward spiritual revival. We have so many things to praise God for today. Let me share with you just four of many reasons we can touch heaven through the prayer of praise today.

We are excited today because God is God. God is awesome and glorious and worthy of our praise, and he is able to do all things.

Do you know what I have noticed? As I have gotten older, there are some things I am not able to do as well as I used to--see, hear, sing, move—little things like that. I am not as able as I used to be. My body knows that. My brain doesn't always recognize that.

Last summer on our beach vacation we had to stay at a condo that had access to a tennis court. Carey and Abby are avid tennis players. I used to play tennis in high school and college. That was thirty-plus years ago. But how hard could it be, right? So I got back on the court, and for two days I was doing pretty well. Nowhere near as good as the girls, but I was holding my own. I started to get confident. At one point, I lunged for a ball, thinking I was young and good. My feet got tangled up, and I took a tumble and hit hard on the concrete court. Lying prostrate on the court, I saw the children on the next court come over, look at me, and run away. Carey and Abby helped me back to the condo, and I spent the rest of the week with an elastic bandage around my cracked rib. I haven't played tennis since. I don't understand; I used to be able to do it.

The Good News today is, our God is always able. His power and might do not diminish with age. He was, and he is, and he will always be God, and our God is able and worthy to be praised.

If anybody knew how to praise God, it was David, the greatest King of Israel. A musician and poet, he is credited as the author of many of the Psalms. Our Scripture lesson today is part of his last official act as King of Israel. He had ruled for nearly 40 years. He was at one time one of the most powerful men in the known world. He was attacked

by enemies, beset by his own moral failures, and two of his sons instigated rebellions against him. Still he maintained his faith in God and his walk with God. Near the end of his life, he was about to pass the torch of leadership to his son Solomon. The one thing he had failed to do—build a Temple to God in Jerusalem—would be accomplished by his son. Looking back over all that has happened, what sort of words come to his lips? Words of praise for Almighty God!

“Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our ancestor Israel, forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might; and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all. And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name.”²

This is our song of praise to God, simply because God is God. To the end of Scripture, to the end of time, for all eternity in heaven, we will praise him! Go all the way to the Book of Revelation, and you hear the saints in heaven singing the same song: *“Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, ‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!’ And the four living creatures said, ‘Amen!’ And the elders fell down and worshipped.”³* What a song of praise! What a God we have!

Secondly, we praise God for the world. He is the Creator of the universe; he made the world and all that is in it. He deserves our

praise. I touched on this two weeks ago, in the context of our stewardship of creation. Stewardship of our environment is very important, and so is the awe and wonder of creation that draws forth praise. Remember the words again of David in Psalm 8: *“O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.... When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”*⁴ No scientific or technological advance of humanity can come close to the creative power of God. Yet sometimes we take his world for granted. We forget to praise him for it. We lose our sense of awe.

One of the most awesome sights in nature is the Old Faithful geyser in Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming. Every few minutes—between half an hour and an hour and a half—a gigantic plume of water and steam shoots an average of 145 feet into the air. It’s beautiful and incredible. But do you know what park rangers report is the most frequently asked question by observers at Old Faithful? “Where’s the bathroom?” I think you can see the connection, but where is the sense of majesty and wonder and praise?

What if we could recapture an appreciation for the world God has given us, really to celebrate the glory and grandeur of what God made just for us? Wouldn’t that bring our hearts to praise?

The poet William Blake wrote,

To see a World in a grain of sand
And a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.⁵

We praise God because of who God is. We praise God for the world God has created. **We praise God for the relationship we have with him.** Isn’t it great that God, the Creator of the entire universe, is someone we can get to know? He is not just a Divine Unmoved Mover, a Metaphysical First Cause, an Existential Ground of Being. God is not a philosophical principle; he is a supernatural spiritual

person. He knows you and me, and what's even more important, he loves you and me with an everlasting love.

We know this because we know Jesus. He is the evidence of God's passionate desire to be in relationship with us. That's why Jesus came from heaven to be born in human flesh in the manger of Bethlehem. That's why Jesus died on the cross to forgive our sins. That's why God raised Jesus from the dead so we could share in his resurrection. Jesus is the sign that God just can't get over us. He loves us that much.

I like the way Bill Hybels puts it in his book, *The God You're Looking For*: "Take a deep breath so you can catch the full force of this next statement. Are you ready? Here it is: *The God you're looking for is head over heels in love with you.*

"Let me give you some more soul-warming news: His affection for you is bound up in who he is, not in what you do, so his affection for you will *never* wane. Because of that love God wants to walk with you today, and he'll want to walk with you tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that, throughout eternity.

"And when we truly walk with God throughout our day, life slowly starts to fall into place. I'm not saying that life will go perfectly or even smoothly. But I am saying that we'll gradually experience ...life in all its fullness."⁶ The love of God and life in all its fullness is reason to praise, don't you think?

Finally we praise God today for our hope of heaven. This is the ultimate victory; this is the great equalizer; this is the balance that outweighs all the burdens of life; this is the final answer to all our problems. Jesus said, "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also.*"⁷ We have a hope of a better place than this world. We call it

heaven, and after our life here on earth, we will live there forever with Jesus.

Dr. Leighton Ford tells about two teenagers in Chicago who wanted to prove their love for each other. They went to the top of a six-story building, kissed each other, and jumped off. They left a note saying, "We're looking for a better place." The girl was killed. The boy was seriously injured.⁸ Tragic.

If you want a better place today, don't go jumping off any buildings. God already has a better place for you. That proves God's love for us. When we find the world to be full of troubles and trials and tribulations, we know we still have a home not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. The slight momentary afflictions of life are preparing us to assume the eternal weight of glory that God has prepared for us.

This is the power of praise. When your strength begins to fail and your abilities seem to weaken, remember that God is able, full of power and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. And praise him!

When the whole world seems like a gloomy place and everything feels like it's turned against you, look at a tree or the sky or watch a bird in flight, and remember that this world belongs to God. He made it, and it's worthy of praise!

When your human relationships are difficult, and you've been hurt or betrayed, remember that God not only made you; he knows you and loves you forever. He will not betray you, and he will not let you go. So praise him!

When the problems mount up and death stares you in the face and you feel the pain of grief, remember your hope of heaven. God has made a home for you, and his kingdom will not be complete unless you are there. Praise him for his salvation!

Praise gives us power to live life to its fullest. It's like a trio of whales that were trapped under the ice off of Point Barrow, Alaska, several years ago. Whales breathe air, and if they can't get to the

surface, they drown. These three gray whales appeared, battered and bloody, gasping for air at a hole in the ice pack. Their only hope was somehow to be transported five miles past the ice pack back to the open sea. Rescuers began cutting a string of breathing holes about twenty yards apart in the six-inch-thick ice.

For eight days they coaxed the whales from one hole to the next, mile after mile. Along the way, one of the whales disappeared and was presumed dead. But finally, with the help of a Russian icebreaker ship, two of the whales swam to freedom.⁹ They even made a movie of this story in 2012 called “Big Miracle.”¹⁰

The big Miracle today is that worship, prayer, and praise are the breathing holes that allow us to survive under the ice pack of our troubles. Battered and bruised by the world, we come to church or we bow in prayer or we take communion. We lift our hearts in praise, and it’s like we’re coming up for air. We breathe in the power of the Holy Spirit, and we find strength and encouragement and comfort and everlasting love and eternal life. The ice is shattered. We are truly and fully alive again. That is exciting news! Praise the Lord!

¹ Per Nilsen, Burnsville, Minnesota, *PreachingToday.com*.

² I Chronicles 29:10-13.

³ Revelation 5:11-14.

⁴ Psalm 8:1, 3-4.

⁵ William Blake, “Auguries of Innocence.”

⁶ Bill Hybels, *The God You’re Looking For* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), p. 194.

⁷ John 14:1-3.

⁸ Leighton Ford, “Hope For A Great Future,” *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 96.

⁹ Craig Brian Larson, *Leadership*, Vol. 11, no. 2, *PreachingToday.com*.

¹⁰ www.imdb.com/title/tt1430615/