

46. Psalms 144-146

Praying Psalm 144 with Jesus



¹Blessed be GOD, my rock, who trains my arms for battle,
²my covenant Lover, my fortress, my stronghold, my deliverer,
my shield, my refuge – You give me victory.

³O GOD, what are we human beings? Why do you care for us?
We are subject to death. Why do you think of us?

⁴We are no more than a breath; our days like a passing shadow.

⁵Lower your heavens, O GOD, and come down.
Touch the mountains. Wreathe them in smoke.

⁶Flash your lightning. Rout the foe.

Let fly your arrows. Put them to flight.

⁷Reach down from on high. Rescue me from alien foes,

⁸*who speak nothing but lies, and swear that their words are true.*

⁹I sing a new song to you, O God.

I play on a ten-stringed harp.

¹⁰You are the one who gives victory to kings.

You rescue your servant David.

¹¹Save me from the cruel sword, deliver me from foreigners,
who speak nothing but lies, and swear that their words are true.

¹²May our sons flourish like saplings,

grown tall and strong from their youth.

May our daughters be graceful as columns,

adorned for a palace.

¹³May our barns be filled with produce of every kind.

May our sheep increase by thousands,

¹⁴and may our cattle be heavy with young.

May there be no breach in the walls,

no cry of distress in our streets.

¹⁵Blessed and happy the people on whom such blessings fall,
the people whose God is GOD.

Psalm 144 is a prayer for the prosperity of God's people, and the protection of the king. GOD is portrayed as a Warrior Warlord (verses 1-2 and 6). This is an image that we find throughout the psalms, but it does not fit with the God revealed by Jesus, and it is not appropriate as Christian prayer.

The psalmist is amazed that the Transcendent God would care for us mortal human beings. This is a theme that recurs in the psalms:

‘What are we, mortal human beings, that you are mindful of us, that you care for us?’ (Psalm 8:4).

‘We human beings are no more than a breath. We pass away like a shadow’ (Psalm 39:5-6).

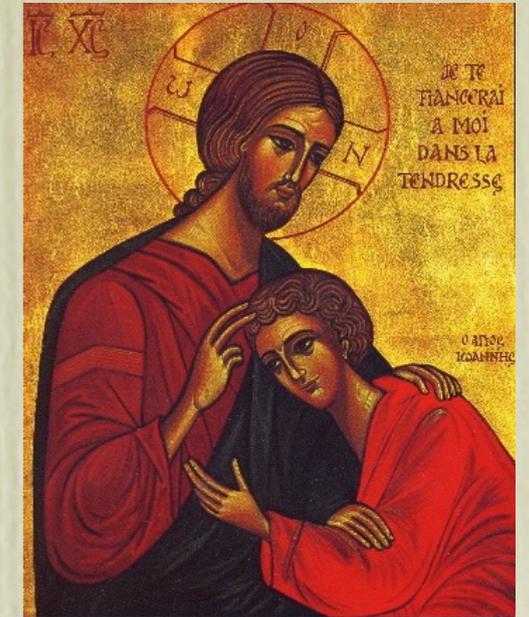
‘Our years come to an end like a sigh’ (Psalm 90:9).

My days are like a lengthening shadow; I wither away like grass’ (Psalm 102:11).

His foes raise their right hands and swear by God, but their words are not to be trusted. Their right hand holds a sword that they turn against their king (verses 8 and 11). In verses 12-15 the psalmist prays for God’s blessing. Praying this psalm with Jesus we reflect on the blessings poured out on us from the Risen Jesus:

‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessing us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love, destining us for adoption as sons for himself through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he determined in himself as a plan for the fullness of time. His plan is to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. In him we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we Jews, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you Gentiles also, hearing the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believing in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. This is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as those who are God’s possession to the praise of his glory’ (Ephesians 1:3-14).

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¹I will extol you, my God and king,
²and never cease praising you.

³GOD is great and greatly to be praised;
a greatness that cannot be measured.

⁴One generation proclaims to the next what you have done,
recounting your mighty deeds.

⁵I ponder on the glorious splendour of your majesty.
I tell the tale of your wonderful deeds.

⁶They manifest your awesome power, revealing your greatness.

⁷They celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,
and sing of your justice.

⁸GOD is gracious and tenderly compassionate,
long-suffering, abounding in covenant love.

⁹GOD is good to all, tenderly compassionate to all creation.

¹⁰All your creation praises you, O GOD,
and all your faithful bless you.

¹¹They speak of the glory of your reign,
and tell of your might.

¹²They make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendour of your reign.

¹³Yours is an everlasting kingdom,
your dominion endures through all generations.

YOU are faithful in all your words, gracious in all your deeds.

¹⁴GOD upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down.

¹⁵The eyes of all creatures look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.

¹⁶You open wide your hand,
satisfying the desire of every living thing.

¹⁷GOD is just in every way,
offering covenant love in everything GOD does.

¹⁸GOD is near to all who call,
who cry to God from their hearts.

¹⁹GOD fulfils all our desires; hears our cry and saves us.

²⁰GOD watches over all who love,
but the wicked are destroyed.

²¹My lips will praise GOD,
and everyone will bless GOD's holy name
forever, for ages unending.

A key theme in Psalm 145 is that of totality and comprehensiveness. This is expressed by the acrostic form (the first verse begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet; the second verse with the second letter; and so on). Totality is also clearly stated in the following verses:

‘I will extol you, my God and king, and never cease praising you’ (verses 1-2).

‘GOD is faithful in all his words, loving in all his deeds’ (verse 13).

‘Everyone will bless GOD’s holy name forever, for ages unending’ (Psalm 21).

Psalm 145 is a psalm praising GOD, the king:

‘I will extol you, my God and king’ (verse 1).

‘They speak of the glory of your reign,
and tell of your might.

They make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendour of your reign.

Yours is an everlasting kingdom,
your dominion endures through all generations’ (verses 11-13).

The reign of GOD is gracious, for he cares for and saves especially the weak and needy:

‘GOD upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down.
The eyes of all creatures look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.
You open wide your hand,
satisfying the desire of every living thing’ (verses 14-16).

‘GOD fulfils all our desires; hears our cry and saves us.
GOD watches over all who love’ (verses 19-20).

Various characteristics of GOD are praised:

I. GOD is great and powerful.

‘GOD is great and greatly to be praised;
a greatness that cannot be measured.

One generation proclaims to the next what you have done,
recounting your mighty deeds.

I ponder on the glorious splendour of your majesty.

I tell the tale of your wonderful deeds.

They manifest your awesome power, revealing your greatness.’

(verses 3-6)

‘They speak of the glory of your reign, and tell of your might.

They make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendour of your reign’ (verses 11-12).

2. GOD's glory.

‘I ponder on the glorious splendour of your majesty’ (verse 5).

‘They speak of the glory of your reign, and tell of your might.
They make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendour of your reign’ (verses 11-12).

3. GOD is good.

‘They celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness’ (verse 7).

‘GOD is good to all’ (verse 9).

4. GOD is just.

‘They sing of your justice’ (verse 7).

‘GOD is just in every way’ (verse 17).

5. GOD is gracious.

‘GOD is gracious’ (verse 8).

‘YOU are gracious in all your deeds’ (verse 13).

6. GOD is tenderly compassionate.

‘GOD is tenderly compassionate (verse 8).

‘GOD is tenderly compassionate to all creation’ (verse 9).

7. GOD is long-suffering.

‘GOD is long-suffering’ (verse 8).

8. GOD's covenant love

‘GOD is abounding in covenant love’ (verse 8).

‘GOD offers covenant love in everything GOD does’ (verse 17).

9. GOD is faithful.

‘YOU are faithful in all your words’ (verse 13).

10. GOD is close.

‘GOD is near to all who call, who cry to God from their hearts’ (verse 18).

11. GOD is holy.

‘Everyone will bless GOD's holy name’ (verse 21).

‘GOD is gracious and tenderly compassionate, long-suffering, abounding in covenant love’ (verse 8).

This is the creedal formula found throughout the Hebrew Bible. As we pray this with Jesus we recall scene after scene where we see Jesus’ tender compassion, remembering Jesus’ words: ‘If you see me, you see the Father’ (John 14:9).

Commenting on God's tender compassion and long suffering love, Origen, the first great Christian Scripture scholar, in his commentary on Ezekiel writes:

'The Father, God of the universe, long suffering, full of mercy and compassion - is it possible that he does not suffer in any way? Do you not know that when he undertook human affairs he underwent human suffering? If people call on him he is moved with compassion and shares their pain, he suffers greatly from love and enters into the experience of things which, because of the greatness of his nature, he cannot of himself experience. For our sakes he takes upon himself human suffering' (PG 13,715).

‘All your faithful bless you’ (verse 10). These are the *hasidim* – those who welcome God’s covenant love (*hesed*) and are faithful to the covenant.

‘You are faithful in all your words’ (verse 13).

‘You satisfy the desire of every living thing’ (verse 16).

‘GOD is near to all who call, who cry to God from their hearts’ (verse 18).

How the psalmist would have loved to see Jesus! Jesus himself said: ‘Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it’ (Matthew 13:17). How near God comes to us in Jesus!

‘Everyone will bless GOD’s holy name’ (verse 21).

Psalm 145

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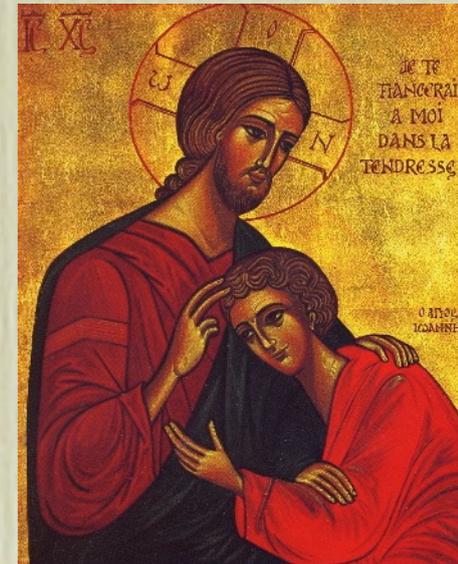
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Praying Psalm 146 with Jesus



¹Praise GOD (Alleluia). Praise GOD, O my soul!

²I will sing praises to GOD all my life long,
making music to my God while I live.

³Put no trust in princes, in human beings who must die.

⁴When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that day their plans come to nothing.

⁵Blessed and happy are those who are helped by Jacob's God,
whose hope is in GOD,

⁶who made the heavens, the earth and the seas,
and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever.

⁷GOD keeps faith forever.

GOD is just to the oppressed,
gives food to the hungry, and sets prisoners free.

⁸GOD opens the eyes of the blind.

GOD lifts up those who are bowed down.

GOD loves the righteous.

⁹GOD watches over strangers

and upholds the orphan and the widow.

GOD thwarts the path of the wicked.

¹⁰GOD reigns forever,

your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise GOD (Alleluia)!

Psalm 146 is an invitation to praise GOD because of who GOD is – a God who cares for those who place their trust in him.

‘Blessed and happy are those who are helped by Jacob’s God’ (verse 5).

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes: ‘Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need’ (Hebrews 4:16).

In verses 7-9 the psalmist lists ten characteristics of GOD.

I. 'GOD keeps faith forever' (verse 7).

This means that God will keep all the promises he has ever made to you and to your children and to the world. We will never be without God's love, no matter how dark the road may seem. Can we believe this when things are going hard for us? Sometimes we have found ourselves unable to keep promises we have made - and sometimes it is because the promises turned out to be unwisely made. Sometimes circumstances that are too complex to unravel have simply brought us to exhaustion and we have had to let promises go. Could we look at the central promises that are still functioning in our lives? Relying on God's grace could we ask to be more open to the Spirit which God is certainly offering us to find more effective ways of keeping the promises which we made in baptism and confirmation to carry on Jesus' mission of love in this world. Praying the psalm with Jesus we hear his exhortation: 'Believe in God and believe in me' (John 14:1).

2. 'GOD is just to the oppressed' (verse 7).

If we believe that God executes right judgment for the oppressed, then a lot of people must not be listening or responding to grace. If we were, the world would not be such an unjust place. Is God asking me or you to reach out in one or other area of oppression and do what we can, always respecting persons and in love, to put injustices right? Little help is gained by being overwhelmed by a huge list. God is the one who is just to the oppressed, so the real question is: Is God inspiring me, or us as a community, to do something in a specific area. If so am I willing to listen and to begin responding? We are mindful of Jesus' words: 'Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?' (Luke 18:7).

3. 'GOD gives food to the hungry' (verse 7).

Praying this with Jesus we recall the scenes where Jesus gave food to the hungry (see Mark 6:34-44; 8:1-10). We recall also the Last Supper when, in ritual, Jesus gave himself in such a way that he would always be with us, nourishing a hunger and a thirst that is for more than food and drink. Can we love God without sharing his longing to reach out to meet people's hunger - for bread, for love, for a listening ear, for dignity, for a place and a home?

4. 'GOD sets prisoners free' (verse 7).

If so many people are locked into racism and prejudice and destructive addictions, and inability to forgive, it is not because grace is lacking. It must be because so many are insensitive to grace and failing to respond to the inspiration of God's loving Spirit to go out and help unlock the prisons that we create in our fear.

We recall Matthew's introduction to Jesus' ministry in Galilee: 'The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned' (Matthew 4:16). Luke sets out Jesus' agenda in a scene in the Capernaum synagogue: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free' (Luke 4:18).

5. **‘GOD opens the eyes of the blind’** (verse 8).

Jesus caused the ‘blind’ to ‘see’ (Matthew 9:30; 11:5; 20:29-34).

We think too of Paul’s enlightenment on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9:3).

6. **‘GOD lifts up those who are bowed down’** (verse 8).

We recall Jesus’ words as he heals a crippled woman: ‘Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?’ (Luke 13:16).

7. **‘GOD loves the righteous’** (verse 8).

Jesus made it clear that God loves everyone, including those we might think of as God’s enemies. What is special about the ‘righteous’ is that they welcome God’s love, whereas the unrighteous are closed to it.

8. 'GOD watches over strangers' (verse 9).

We think of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). Also Jesus' exhortation: 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind' (Luke 14:12-13). Praying this psalm with Jesus we recall Jesus' parable about the Ultimate Judgment: 'The king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me' (Matthew 25:34-36).

9. 'GOD upholds the orphan and the widow' (Verse 9).

Jesus points to a widow as the one who perfectly exemplifies the essence of discipleship: 'A poor widow came and put in two copper cent pieces. Jesus called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury' (Mark 12:42-43).

10. 'GOD thwarts the path of the wicked' (verse 9).

The scene of the repentant thief who was crucified with Jesus reveals God's love for each of us, right to the end (Luke 23:39-43). But love does not impose itself. Like the thief we must open our hearts to welcome the love we are offered. The path of sin leads only to death, the death of separation from God.

‘GOD reigns forever’ (verse 10).

‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever’ (Revelation 11:15).

Psalm 146

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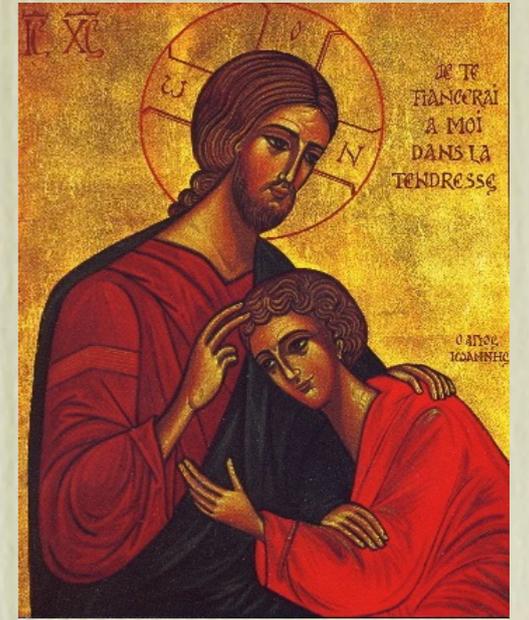
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Alleluia

O Great Love