

The God Who Condescends

Psalm 113

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God loves so much that He became flesh to rescue His creation from condemnation. The Jews sang Psalm 113 at the annual Passover celebration of their Exodus from Egypt. This is one of six psalms called the Egyptian Hallel Psalms. The Hebrew word *Halal* means praise. Praise conveys the idea of awe and wonder. Only one of the six Psalms speaks directly of the Exodus (Psalm 114). The idea of Psalm 113 concerns the God that bends down and redeems from the dust of the earth. Psalm 114 is a hymn praising God for the redemption of Israel and for the One who will redeem Israel again through His Son Jesus. Psalm 115 is a hymn regarding group praise to Him who blesses Israel and the world. Psalm 116 is a song on the subject of personal thanksgiving, but it is also a song of thanksgiving in anticipation of the Resurrection of Jesus. Psalm 117 is a psalm concerning global vision and praise for the people of God, and finally, Psalm 118 is a psalm on liturgical parade. This psalm sets forth the story of His suffering, conflict, triumph, and glorification. All of these psalms sing of God the Redeemer and of some aspect of His redeeming character.

PSALMS AND THE PASSOVER

Psalm 113 is an appropriate psalm to begin the Passover celebration. This psalm is a hymn that recalls God's activity in the lives of the Israelites. God looked down from heaven and rescued them from the land of bondage. This salvation of Abraham's seed began in Egypt and spread to the nations. The first two psalms (113-114) were sung before the Passover meal and the last four (115-118) were sung following the Passover meal.¹ After the drinking of the fourth cup (The Cup of Hallel), Mark records the following comment about Jesus and the Apostles:

¹See Robert G. Bratcher and William D. Reayburn, *A Handbook on Psalms*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991), 964.

“When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (Mark 14:26).² For Christians, this psalm is a reminder of the Incarnation—when the Word became flesh (John 1:14).

Jesus and the Apostles

These were the last psalms that our Lord sang before His Crucifixion. Jesus had previously cited Psalm 118:22-23 to the religious leaders—the chief priest, teachers of the Law, and the elders (Mark 11:27; 12:9)—concerning their rejection of Him as the Stone the builders rejected. These various studies of psalms are much more comprehensive than just deliverance from Egyptian bondage. These psalms were ultimately describing a greater Exodus—an Exodus from the world of darkness into the kingdom of God’s dear Son. Thus, Psalm 113 is a fitting psalm of thanksgiving and praise to the God who condescended in order to redeem His creation. Hence, it is proper for every believer to sing, “Praise the Lord” (Psalm 113:1) for the Incarnation—in the Incarnation, God stooped down.

A SUMMONS TO PRAISE GOD

This Psalm begins and ends with “Praise the LORD” (הַלְלֵי יְהוָה, *hāl'·lû yāh*)³ [113:1, 9]. This psalm calls for the servants of the LORD (הַגְּבֻרִים, *YHWH*) to praise Him (113:1b). Again, the psalmist cries out, “praise the name of the LORD” (113:1c), and, once more, he writes, “Let the name of the LORD be praised, both now and forever” (113:2). Five times he calls upon his readers to “praise the Lord.” He extends an invitation to praise *YHWH*: “From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the LORD is to be praised” (113:3). Within three verses (1-3), the psalmist issues a summons to praise the “**name**” of the LORD three times. For every believer, the name of the LORD is important. This name *YHWH* reveals who God is. He is not just any God, but rather, He is the One who is revealed in creation, on Sinai, and in the person of His Son—Jesus the Messiah (John 14:8-11).⁴

Begins and Ends with Praise

As mentioned above, this psalm begins with the summons to praise in the imperative—“Praise the LORD” (113:1). This song of praise addresses the name of *YHWH* (הַגְּבֻרִים, *šēm' YHWH*) [113:1c]. The name “stands as a substitute term in place of the person and becomes the

²See Dallas Burdette, “Passover Traditions in the Time of Christ,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2008), 181-195, for a detailed study of the Passover in the time of Christ.

³*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart) 1990.

⁴For an excellent explanation of the name *JHWH*, see James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 107—150, An Expositional Commentary*, Vol., 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 922.

embodiment of the presence and power of God.”⁵ The psalmist does not stop with just the word “praise,” he says that the name of the LORD is “blessed” (113:2). Not only is the name of the LORD “blessed,” but the psalmist says, “from now” and “even unto eternity” (מְעַתָּה וְעַד-עוֹלָם, *mē·‘āt-tā(h)’ w^e ‘ăd-·‘ô-lām’*). YHWH’s name permeates and fills the whole earth. David expresses the greatness of the Lord’s name in Psalm 8:1: “O LORD, our Lord (יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, *yhwh ‘ădō-nê’-nû*), how majestic is your name in all the earth!” Are we conscious of the majestic name of YHWH? The psalmist addresses the worshiping community and encourages God’s people to bless Yahweh’s name—the revelation of His being and will.

FIRST DIVISION

Apart from the opening and closing of this psalm, the psalmist appears to set forth three sections in his call for praise. The first division calls for praise and is bound by the repetition of “praise.” The psalmist writes:

Praise the LORD (הַלְלֵי-יְהוָה, *hāl’-lû yāh’*). Praise, O servants of the LORD, praise the name (שְׁמֵי, *šēm’*) of the LORD. ² Let the name (שְׁמֵי, *šēm’*) of the LORD be praised, both now and forevermore. ³ From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name (שְׁמֵי, *šēm’*) of the LORD is to be **praised**. (113:1-3)

Why Praise?

Why do we, as Christians, need to praise God? Is it because God needs it or do we praise God because it is an essential ingredient in our lives? Praise is an act of faith. Praise must always be an act of faith. It is an act of faith that affirms the glory of God “above the heavens.” For us to worship God that is beyond the physical senses is indeed great. Faith is rooted, not so much in empirical proof, as it is in total trust. The act of faith presupposes our stand of faith in God.

Congregational participation in praise helps to reinforce the faith in which it is rooted. We worship a God that is transcendent, and, at the same time, a God that is greater than the powers of the world. To the nonbeliever, faith may seem the height of folly, but for every believer, he or she reinforces this faith in God through worshipping together. For us to fail to recognize that faith presupposes faith would be the essence of foolishness.⁶ The words of the author of the Book of Hebrews helps to reinforce the necessity of faith in the life of God’s people: “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because **anyone** who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6).

⁵Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60—150*, translated by Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 368.

⁶See Peter C. Craigie, “Psalm 113,” *Interpretation* 39/1 (January 1985): 72-73. I am deeply indebted for Craigie’s insight concerning the nature of faith in the life of the believer. I adopted the contents of this section in order to help Christians understand the necessity of praise in their lives.

Majesty and Mercy Evoke Praise

For the psalmist, God is to be praised because of His majesty in transcendence and because of His mercy in dealing with human beings.⁷ Each of the first three verses contains the divine name of “Yahweh” [LORD] (*YHWH*), culminating in the identity and involvement of God in His creation. The occurrence of name (*šēm*) in each of the first three verses suggests not only the presence of God but also evokes God’s character. This is further confirmed in verse 4: “The LORD is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens.” The psalmist proposes a question about God’s moral fiber: “Who is like the LORD our God, the One who sits enthroned on high?” (113:5). He then tells his readers something about this God: “who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?” (113:5).

Praise Is Service

Psalms 113 is a testimony about who God is. It is also a testimony that reveals what God does. God not only exercises authority from above, but He also exercises authority from below. The chief service of every individual is to praise the LORD. When we serve the LORD in worship, then that worship is called “service.” The God whom we serve cannot be seen with the human eye, but God can be seen in His name and all that goes with it. It is in this vein that Jesus instructs His disciples: “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). James L. Mays (Cyrus McCormick Professor of Hebrew and the Old Testament at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia) captures this concept when he writes: “Each act of praise must be understood as participation in a universal and everlasting activity.”⁸

THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IS CALLED UPON TO PRAISE

Just as the nation of Israel praised the LORD for all His benefits, so, too, we are to praise the LORD. Peter in his First Epistle writes about the correlation between redemption and praise: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that **you may declare the praises of him** who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). Having called attention to their present status, he again reminds them of their former life: “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (2:10).

⁷See Peter C. Craigie, “Psalm 113,” *Interpretation* 39, Vol., 1 (January 1985): 70-74 for an excellent commentary on these verses (1-3).

⁸James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 361.

Duration of Praise

How long should this praise go on? The psalmist says, “Let the name of the LORD be praised, both now and forevermore” (Psalm 113:2). We are to praise God for salvation. We are to continue to praise Him for our rescue from the darkness of sin. Hopefully, we who are a part of the company of the redeemed will continue to praise our Maker and Savior. In the words of the psalmist, as cited above, praise is “both now and forevermore.” Every Christian must praise the Lord. The words of the psalmist must continue as long as mankind lives: “praise the name of the LORD” (113:1). The words of Asaph address this concept of “generation to generation” in one of his psalms:

O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. ² I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old— ³ what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. ⁴**We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation** the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. ⁵ He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, ⁶ so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. ⁷ Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands. ⁸ They would not be like their forefathers—a stubborn and rebellious generation, whose hearts were not loyal to God, whose spirits were not faithful to him. (Psalm 78:1-8)

SECOND DIVISION

The second part focuses on the identity of God and His willingness to become involved in His creation. This second piece contains the substance of worship; in other words, the LORD is to be praised because of His supremacy in both heaven and earth.

The **LORD is exalted** over all the nations, his **glory above the heavens**. ⁵ Who is like the LORD our God, the One who **sits enthroned on high**, ⁶ **who stoops down** to look on the heavens and the earth? (113:4-6)

God’s Condescension to Humanity

Who is like the Lord our God? One reason for praise is that “The LORD is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens” (113:4). When we reflect upon God, we cannot help but stand in awe and wonder, even as the psalmist: “Who is like the LORD our God, the One who sits enthroned on high” (113:5ab). There is no God like the “LORD our God.” This God that redeems is not only “exalted over all the nations” and “his glory above the heavens,” but this God is one **“who stoops down** to look on the heavens and the earth” (113:5cd). The psalmist informs his readers that God exalts Himself and humbles Himself, both are His own act and deed. God is the fountain of His own honor and the spring of His own grace.

God Stoops Down in the Incarnation

Not only was God willing to stoop down and become involved in the plight, or predicament, of men and women, but He was willing to become flesh to redeem His creation. We cannot help but recall the Incarnation when we meditate upon “who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth.” John, in his Gospel, records the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in which we catch a glimpse of God’s looking down. In this dialogue, our Lord Jesus says:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17)

Again, John begins his Gospel with the words: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning” (1:1-2). This One that John speaks of as being “in the beginning” was also spoken of as “God.” In verse 14 of this chapter, John speaks of this God as **stooping down**: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14).

Paul’s Letter to the Galatians about the Incarnation

Not only did John, one of Christ’s chosen Apostles, stand in awe of this wonder of redemption, but Paul, too, reminds the churches in the province of Galatia that God sent His Son to save sinful man:

But when the time had fully come, **God sent his Son, born of a woman**, born under law,⁵ to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.⁶ Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “*Abba*,^a Father.”⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir. (Galatians 4:4-7)

Paul’s Letter to the Philippians about the Incarnation

Again, as we contemplate the matchless love of God, we also recall the words of Paul to the Philippians as he **sets forth the stooping down** of the Word to become flesh:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,⁷ but **made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant**, being made in human likeness.⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8)

^a Aramaic for *Father*

This event of God becoming flesh causes Paul to express the exaltation of Jesus by God the Father:

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ that **at the name of Jesus every knee should bow**, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (2:9-11)

Paul's Ecstatic Praise for God's Condescension

Once more, every child of God should stand in awe and wonder and praise at such love. Is it any wonder that Paul breaks forth in ecstatic praise to God in his letter to the Christians of Ephesus? Listen to Paul as he exclaims:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love⁵ he^a predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—⁶ **to the praise of his glorious grace**, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace⁸ that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.⁹ And he^b made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ,¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.¹¹ In him we were also chosen,^c having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will,¹² in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, **might be for the praise of his glory**.¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—**to the praise of his glory**. (Ephesians 1:3-14)

When we praise God, we worship God. Even within the human realm, the response of a lover to the beloved is one of praise. It is not uncommon for an individual to say of the one loved, "I worship the ground that person walks on." Worship for the believer is a response to the knowledge of God. Craigie is correct when he writes: "Praise is thus an expression of fulfillment in us, not a tribute cast before the divine Ego."⁹ Praise emerges out of a life lived to God. When we discover why we exist and the meaning of our existence, then we cannot refrain from the activity of praise in every area of our lives.

Is this not what Paul speaks of in the Ephesian Epistle? Paul goes right to the heart of praise when he writes: "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. **Sing and make music in your heart** to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 5:19-20). During the same period of time in which he wrote this Ephesian Epistle, he also wrote to the Christians of Colossae:

^a Or *sight in love. He*

^b Or *us. With all wisdom and understanding, he*

^c Or *were made heirs*

⁹ Craigie, "Psalm 113," *Interpretation*.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:16-17)

As Paul wrote these two Epistles, we cannot help but wonder if Paul did not have in mind the words of Psalm 150?

Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens.² Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness.³ Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre,⁴ praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute,⁵ praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals.⁶ Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.¹⁰

Matthew and the Incarnation

Matthew also testifies concerning how God stooped down to rescue us from His condemnation. As we reflect upon the Incarnation, we come away with rapturous praise for such a condescending God—God who became flesh. Matthew begins his Gospel with an emphasis upon the mission of this One who is called Jesus Christ. Listen to him as he calls attention to the words of an angel:

“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,^a because he will save his people from their sins.”²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:²³ “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”^b—which means, “God with us.” (Matthew 1:21-23)

THE THIRD SECTION

The third section calls attention to God’s activity as reason for praise. This segment also adds a new dimension to the substance of praise—the LORD deals graciously with the poor and afflicted. This concern of God for the poor calls forth praise:

He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap;⁸ he seats them with princes, with the princes of their people.⁹ He settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children. Praise the LORD (Hy: Wlljh', h~l\$IW y`h). (113:7-9)

We can hardly read this third section of Psalm 113 without reflecting upon Jesus’ response to the disciples of John the Baptist as to whether Jesus was the One to come:

¹⁰See Dallas Burdette, “God Is a Lover of Music,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2008), 236-248, for an in-depth study of this psalm.

^a *Jesus* is the Greek form of *Joshua*, which means *the LORD saves*.

^b Isaiah 7:14

After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.^a ² When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” ⁴ Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy^b are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.” (Matthew 11:1-6)

God Is Concerned

The Israelites found this psalm extremely appropriate as liturgy in their observance of the Passover. Psalm 113 is a fitting suggestion for the celebration of the Egyptian Exodus. Within this context, the Jews identify Israel as poor and weak. God uses His superiority to help the inferior; God gets involved in the state of affairs of the society of the families of Israel in Egypt and creates a new nation. He raises Israel from the dust, and He lifts Israel from the ash heap. There is a sense in which Israel could also be compared to a barren woman. How? Well, God intervened and gave Israel children. God, through Isaiah the prophet, speaks of Israel as a “barren woman”:

Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband. (Isaiah 54:1)

This psalm was a psalm of praise about God’s mercy. For the psalmist, God is concerned about the “poor” and the “needy.” We cannot read Psalm 113 without reflecting upon Hannah’s prayer for her son, Samuel. It appears that the psalmist appropriated, through the Holy Spirit, the words of Hannah in her description of God’s concern for the poor and needy. The psalmist was able to incorporate the words of Hannah’s prayer to another *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) in his praise to God for His mercy. The psalmist was able to incorporate parts of Hannah’s prayer in order to make his own psalm relevant in the lives of the Israelites. Listen to excerpts from Hannah’s prayer:

There is no one holy^b like the LORD; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. ³Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the LORD is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed. ⁴The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength. ⁵Those who were full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry hunger no more. She who was barren has borne seven children, but she who has had many sons pines away. ⁶The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave^c and raises up. ⁷The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. ⁸He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of

^a Greek *in their towns*

^b The Greek word was used for various diseases affecting the skin—not necessarily leprosy.

^b Or *no Holy One*

^c Hebrew *Sheol*

honor. For the foundations of the earth are the LORD's; upon them he has set the world. (1 Samuel 2:2-8)

Mary, the mother of Jesus, too, was able to utilize the essence of Psalm 113 in her song as she contemplates the richness of God's mercy. Just a casual reading of Mary's song reveals that Psalm 113 is also reflected in what is sometimes called Mary's Magnificat. When we read Mary's song, we cannot help but reflect upon Psalm 113. In Mary's joy for the child in her womb, she praises God for His power as He reverses the order of humanity's condition—from condemnation to eternal life. Listen to Mary as she seeks to capture the wonder of it all:

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. ⁵²He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. ⁵³He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful ⁵⁵to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers." (Luke 1:46-55)

ABRAHAM AND HIS DESCENDANTS

Mary, in reflecting upon the child in her womb, remembers the promise that God made to Abraham (2166-1991 BC) when He calls Abraham out of Ur of Chaldea. She knows that through the seed of Abraham the Savior of the world comes. Moses records this encounter of Abraham with God with the following words:

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. ²I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:1-3)

Moses (1526-1406 BC) records for his readers four distinctive elements associated with Abraham's encounter with God: **(1)** numerous offspring [Genesis 13:16; 15:3-5; 17: 2, 4; 22:17], **(2)** God would be a God to him and to his seed [17:1-8], **(3)** give to him and his seed an everlasting possession [12:7; 13:15; 15:18-21; 17:8], and **(4)** all nations of the earth would be blessed through him and his seed [13:3; 17:18]. Mary knew the time had arrived in which the promise to Abraham was coming to pass. It is also in this vein that Paul writes to the churches in the province of Galatia about the promise that God made with Abraham:

Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case (**σπέρματι**, *spermati*, "seed").¹¹
¹⁶The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds,"

¹¹ Noun: neuter, singular, dative.

(σπέρμασιν, *spermasin*, “seeds”),¹² meaning many people, but “and to your seed,”^a (σπέρματι, *spermati*, “seed”) meaning one person, who is Christ.¹⁷ What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.¹⁸ For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise. (Galatians 3:15-18)

Paul draws conclusions based upon his interpretation of Genesis 13:15 that Christians are a part of the seed of Abraham. He captures the essence of Mary’s song when he writes:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26-29)

When we clothe ourselves with Christ through baptism,¹³ we become a part of Abraham’s seed. We now belong to Christ. Yes, in baptism we “clothe” ourselves “with Christ.” Do we believe? Have we submitted to baptism? Do we belong to Abraham’s seed? Do we want to belong to Christ? Again, Paul calls upon the Galatian Christians to reflect upon Abraham:

Consider Abraham: “He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”^a⁷ Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.⁸ The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.”^b⁹ So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Galatians 3:6-9)

What does this Scripture mean to us: “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you”? Paul says this promise is the essence of the Gospel. What is the Gospel? It is the Good News that God provides forgiveness of sins through His Son Jesus. When Peter speaks to the Sanhedrin, he boldly proclaims: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). As we contemplate upon this great mystery, we cannot help but recall the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel as he speaks of Jesus and Abraham’s seed: “A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1). We quickly detect that Jesus is in the genealogy of David and Abraham. David is a descendant of Abraham; Jesus is a descendant of David.

¹² Noun: neuter, plural, dative.

^a Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 24:7

¹³For an in-depth study of baptism and its relationship within the Christian community see Dallas Burdette, “Baptism from Heaven or from Men?” in Dallas Burdette, *Biblical Preaching and Teaching: Jesus and Our Responsibilities*, Vol., 1 (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 234-243.

^a Gen. 15:6

^b Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18

Paul, too, calls attention to the Gospel and to the human descent of Jesus from David:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—² **the gospel he promised beforehand** through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures ³ **regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David,** ⁴ and who through the Spirit^a of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God^b by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. ⁵ Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. ⁶ And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:1-6)

The Jewish leaders rejected the “Good News” about “forgiveness” through faith in Jesus. The leaders based their salvation upon Law keeping. On the other hand, Paul argues, “a man is **justified by faith** apart from observing the law” (3:26). Again, Paul writes:

Therefore, since we have been **justified through faith**, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have **gained access by faith into this grace** in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. (5:1-2)

Jesus' mother knew that something was happening, even though she may not have known perfectly all that was involved in this miraculous pregnancy. Nevertheless, she knew that her Son would be the Savior of the world (Matthew 1:21). She knew that the time had come in which God would bless the world through the “seed” of Abraham. It is significant that this Gospel that God had promised to Abraham is developed in the prophetic writings. Just a cursory reading of the prophets reveals that the prophets continued to develop messianic overtones down through the centuries in calling Israel's attention to one particular person—the Messiah—that would someday redeem Israel. For example, Isaiah (739 BC) prophesies concerning God's method of dealing with transgressions. He demonstrates that God would take care of sin in one individual:

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6)

Isaiah does not stop with just this graphic picture of the Messiah's bearing “our infirmities,” “our sorrows,” “our transgressions,” and “our iniquities,” but he continues to expand in more detail how this atonement would be accomplished:

Yet **it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer**, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. ¹¹ After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; **by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many**, and **he will bear their**

^a Or *who as to his spirit*

^b Or *was appointed to be the Son of God with power*

iniquities. ¹² Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because **he poured out his life unto death,** and **was numbered with the transgressors.** For **he bore the sin of many,** and **made intercession for the transgressors.** (53:10-12)

Philip the Evangelist: The Ethiopian Eunuch and Isaiah 53

Over seven hundred years after the Book of Isaiah was written, we discover that Isaiah 53 is the text that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading when Philip the evangelist joined himself to the eunuch's chariot. Luke records for his readers the conversation, at least in part, which took place when the two met: "The eunuch asked Philip, 'Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?' Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:34-35).

Peter the Apostle: Cornelius and His Household

Not only was Philip called to approach the Ethiopian and tell him the Good News about Jesus, but also Peter was called to tell the story of Jesus to a Gentile—Cornelius the centurion. This story is found in Acts 10. Upon Peter's arrival to the centurion's home, he told them the story about Jesus as God's way of salvation, that is, God's way of peace.

Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. ³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. ³⁹ We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." (10:34-43)

Is it any wonder that Mary wrote her song about how "His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation" (Luke 1:50). And, then, we also marvel at how Mary concludes her song: "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers" (1:54-55).

Paul the Apostle: The Seed of Abraham

We cannot help but reflect upon the words of the psalmist and Mary's song as we read the words of Paul to the Romans:

But now a righteousness **from God**, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are **justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.** ²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement,^a through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:21-26)

In the fourth chapter of Romans, Paul discusses the justification of Abraham by faith, and then he concludes that Jesus “was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (4:25). Just as Abraham was justified by faith, so, too, we are justified by faith in Jesus. Jesus is the “seed” through whom all nations of the earth would be blessed. Earlier, Paul calls attention to how Abraham and his seed received/receives this promise:

It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. ¹⁴ For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, ¹⁵ because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. ¹⁶ **Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring**—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷ As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.”^c He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were. (4:13-17)

CONCLUSION

If we wish to participate in this promise God made to Abraham, then we must accept this promise through faith in Jesus Christ. Once we believe, then we must also respond to the Good News by submitting to the water baptism that our Lord commanded in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20). This is the very reason that Peter commands the Centurion and his household to be baptized in water (Acts 10:47-48). We, as Christians, are still summoned to praise Him, lest we forget the centrality of God in our lives. Are we praising God for His mighty acts of love? Are we praising God for His salvation made available by Himself through faith in Christ, not works?

Are we believers in Jesus as God's way of salvation? Are we presenting our bodies as living sacrifices to God? **Once we have submitted our lives to the Lord in baptism, then we**

^a 25Or as the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin

^c Gen. 17:5

are “**to offer your [our] bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your [our]spiritual act of worship**” (Romans 12:1). Have we offered our bodies as living sacrifices as our spiritual act of worship? Psalm 113 is an expression of faith in the majestic God who stoops down in spite of the moral depravity of men and women. Praise is an expression of thanks for God’s concern for the lost, the poor, the needy, and the barren women (113:7-9). Is it any wonder that Jesus and His disciples sang this song during the Passover? Just what do these words of the psalmist mean to us?

He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; ⁸ he seats them with princes, with the princes of their people. ⁹ He settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children. Praise the LORD (הַלְלוּ יְיָ, *hāl'·lû yāh'*). (Psalm 113: 7-9)

Have we humbled ourselves in the presence of God for His mercy in stooping down to rescue us? Are we thanking God that He has made our bodies living temples in which to dwell? What does Psalm 113 really and truly mean to us in our Christian walk? As Jesus sang this psalm with His chosen disciples, we cannot help but wonder if they understood the full import of this phrase: “who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth” (113:6). Paul’s words to the Christians at Philippi are a good commentary on Psalm 113. Listen to Paul as he captures the very heart of what it means to “stoop down”:

Who, being in very nature^a God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷but made himself nothing, taking the very nature^b of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, **he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!** (Philippians 3:6-8)

^a Or in the form of

^b Or the form