Praise the Almighty

***Lutheran Service Book* 797** | study by Bernard J. Schey

Introduction

In recent years many churches have popularized anthems for worship known as "praise songs." Actually, one would be hard pressed to find a hymn worth the name that *isn't* a "praise song." A good hymn to Christ is not only filled with happy thoughts; the reality of sin and death are featured in them as well, along with the grand victory of the cross of Jesus.

- Do our souls always praise the Lord God? Do we praise Him for *all* things? How do we know that our praises are acceptable to Him? See Rom. 8:26–30; Heb.10:19–25.
- What is the relationship of text/words to melody in a hymn? Could some hymns be better matched when their words and tune are compared?

Exploring the Scriptures

The last five psalms in the Book of Psalms each begin with the Hebrew word "Hallelujah!" (meaning "Praise the Lord!"). Hence, they are called the "Final Hallel" psalms. This hymn, "Praise the Almighty," is a loose paraphrase of Psalm 146, the first of that group of five psalms.

If we take political campaigns too seriously, we might begin to believe that electing just the right candidates will bring about a golden age of purity, wealth, peace and well-being. However, verses 3 and 4 of Psalm 146 put that idea out of reach. But grand assurances are given to those who cannot well defend or even speak for themselves. See verses 7–9.

- Which sorts of people are included in that group in our own day and time?

Exploring the Hymn

Background

Johann Daniel Herrnschmidt (1675–1723) came from a small town in southwestern Germany and spent time there as a parish pastor. He concluded his career as a professor at the University of Halle, in Halle, Germany, the center of the Pietist Movement among German Lutherans. This school of thought began over concern that people weren't being taught or encouraged to lead a devout, Christlike life. While this inconsistency is a concern of every child of God in any age (Romans 7), the Pietists sought to address it wrongly when they tried to motivate by means of the Law rather than the Gospel. Yet the Pietists had their strengths, and this hymn is an example of a zealous song of praise from the sincere heart of a teacher and pastor.

- When any one of us is prompted to write down a prayer or song of praise, even a few words long, is that a valid confession of faith? Why must the Scriptures be our guide in such confessions or prayers?

Text

Our prayer as Christians for steadfastness in faith to the point of death is expressed clearly in the first stanza of this hymn. See Ps. 104:33–34.

- Will the song of faith always sound beautiful to the ear, that is to say, hit the right notes and always be on key?

In stanza 2, we are reminded again of the limited nature of earthly help. Certainly God has established governments and other authorities for our benefit and protection (Romans 13), but they all must yield to Christ when it comes time to answer concerns over eternal life.

- How does Jesus teach that the powers of this world have clear limits? See John 18:35–38; 19:10–11.

Stanza 3 encourages us to trust above all things in God, who alone can keep us in faith in Him until our lives end, and who will not let any of His children slip away. See John 10:27–30.

- Jesus fulfilled Psalm 1 perfectly. How do we now follow in His steps in the words of this, the first of the 150 psalms?

The poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3) are those who know their sin all too well and cry for mercy from God Himself. They cry for mercy and God Himself answers them with the assurance of the cross and resurrection of Jesus (Gal. 6:14). Stanza 4 addresses this desperate need.

- How is it that widows and the fatherless need this assurance in a way unknown to those who have not been widowed or orphaned?

Herrnschmidt concludes the hymn with a fifth stanza done in a doxological ("glory words") mode. The final address of praise is to the three persons of the blessed Trinity. Just as the psalmist ends Psalm 146 with a final "Hallelujah!" so does the hymn writer exhort the singers to join "with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven" (*TLH*, p. 25) in praising and glorifying the one true God.

- In Rev. 5:11–14, the final word is "Amen!" How can we express our agreement and unity with this word that means "Let it be so!"?

Making the Connection

This grand hymn of praise calls us to laud and magnify the Lord's name not just when we are in a happy and jubilant mood, but also when we are indifferent to thoughts of praise, or even when we are crushed by the effects of sin in this world.

- "Yes, I will laud Him until death" (st. 1) truly seems to include every chapter of life! Can you think of times when, though shattered with grief, you've been called to sing to Christ — even through tears?
- "Penitent sinners, for mercy crying, / Pardon and peace from Him obtain" (st. 4). How does this hymn teach us that our greatest need is for reconciliation and forgiveness in Christ Jesus, our Lord?

In Closing

Never forget that every hymn worth the name is a hymn of praise. Whether or not the tune is "happy" or "sad," if the tempo is "upbeat" or not, the name of God is to be praised for the fact that He has rescued us from our sins. The God of Jacob (Ps. 146:5) has promised to hear us and to rescue us.

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 797.

Prayer

O Lord, let Your merciful ears be open to the prayers of Your humble servants and grant that what they ask may be in accord with Your gracious will; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 18B).