

## When I don't feel like praising him

I have two main problems in going to church services. The first is when I am thinking about leaving the house (or am on my way) and I find myself wishing I was going to do something else instead – like staying at home to watch TV or browse a few websites. The second is when I am actually in the building and the service has started but I find singing the words in a heartfelt way difficult. My mind is distracted. Or simply lethargic.

This makes me feel conflicted and sometimes quite embarrassed, especially as I'm the pastor. *'I am glad they don't know that the man who is going to lead feels so ambivalent about even being there'* I think rather guiltily as I cycle to church.

One Sunday evening I thought I would begin the sermon with a confession along the lines of the previous two paragraphs. The nods of recognition and the knowing laughs around the congregation came as a bit of a relief. I discovered that (as with so many things I struggle with) my fears of being the only one like this were completely wrong. I am not alone in my own church and probably not in most others either.

Psalm 103 helps with those problems, which affect our personal prayers just as much as our difficulties with church services. In fact this psalm can really transform them. It is a piece of divinely inspired poetry which is designed to rekindle praise in our hearts. The way it works is to put words

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in our mouths through which we address ourselves and rouse ourselves to praise. Why not try this by saying the opening line:

█ *Praise the Lord, my soul.*<sup>1</sup>

This is an instruction and a command to praise. We praise a person: the Lord – the one and only true God. He lives for ever and is before all time and outside all time, yet created us, revealed himself to us and relates to us as Master and Father. He is the one who deserves praise because of who he is in the incomparable greatness of his being, and because he has been so generous and kind to us in nature and in grace.

The command has a specific content: ‘praise his *holy name*’ (verse 1, my italics). Immediately we are into an area which is rarified: holiness. Our God is different. He has no dark corners or flaws. He simply is pure and upright. So biblical praise is about recognising his reality – as opposed to singing doubtfully about a God we aren’t sure about. It is about specific recognition of his specific identity – as opposed to a God we are vague about or have decided must be like this or that according to our own personal preferences. It is about awe for his holiness, his unlikeness to us in so many ways.

But the command to self is not enough. The psalmist repeats it in the next line: ‘Praise the Lord, my soul’ (verse 2). The self is examined; it is not praising God. The self is diagnosed: it needs impetus. The self realises that he is the one to give this to himself so the self is directed.

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The old Bible commentator Matthew Henry says:

*David is talking to himself and he is no fool that thus talks to himself and excites his own soul to that which is good.*<sup>2</sup>

I wonder if in Matthew Henry’s day talking to yourself was said to be a sign of madness as it is often in ours. Perhaps that is part of the background to his saying, ‘he is no fool that thus talks to himself’. Or perhaps it is a way of saying, ‘It is a mark of great wisdom to talk like this to yourself.’ But we shouldn’t get too caught up with those relatively minor considerations. The gold here is in the last phrase: ‘he is no fool that ... excites his own soul to that which is good.’

Do you need to reignite the fires of praise and rekindle the glow of worship? Our fires go out or burn low. Our enthusiasm dims. And it doesn’t naturally come welling up from within. But we can do something about this. We are not stuck in the mediocrity of half-heartedness. We can rouse ourselves. David invites us to engage in an inner dialogue in which we use our mind and our memory to rouse our emotions.

In all areas of life we can get used to having something – perhaps a pay rise or the return to health after an injury or an illness – and start to take it for granted. Thomas Hardy, the well-known novelist, also wrote poetry. (Some people think his poems are better than his novels.) His *Poems of 1912–13* were written after his wife, Emma, died. Their marriage had failed to excite Hardy very much for years. Then she died. And only then did he realise how much he had loved her.

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The poems express the loss of what he hadn't appreciated at the time.

We can stop appreciating the Lord. We can forget all the good things he has done for us. That must have been true for David because he says rather firmly to himself:

*Praise the Lord, my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits (Psalm 103:2).*

This kind of inner self-talk is precisely what many of us need. Our problem is not that we don't have an inner dialogue; it's that we have a different one going on in which we listen to ourselves instead of talking to ourselves.<sup>3</sup> The inner feelings and thoughts we listen to are the ones that stop praise coming. If we just pay attention to them, we will very often find an excuse not to go to church – or when we get there, will take part in a detached way. It may well mean we spend our time at church critical of others (or perhaps ourselves). And then we fail to praise God as we might. In any situation there is always something for a Christian to praise God.

Of course there are times when this is harder than ever to do. My father died on Christmas Eve a few years ago and I was quite subdued in the service on Christmas Day. But God still enabled me to sing praise to Christ with authenticity – my dad's death was sad but God was still God and worthy of praise. In those situations it is amazing how the right kind of gospel self-talk enables praise.

When you don't feel like coming to church, could you talk to yourself this way? Or when you are at church and

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a hymn is announced but you don't feel very much inside, could you talk to yourself this way? Do so using the words of Psalm 103. This is the genius of the psalm: all you have to do is read it out loud. But as you read it, you will find yourself talking to yourself. It will put words into your mouth which, as you say them, cause something to happen: gospel self-talk!

Here's an experiment you might want to try. Why not read Psalm 103 out loud on your own every day this week? It doesn't take very long. The last time I tried was one afternoon when I was probably a bit sleepy. It took me 1 minute 45 seconds. So if you could find 2 minutes in your daily schedule, I invite you to try this – and to savour the benefits. If you think two minutes is too long, how about just the first five verses? That takes no more than a few seconds! As you do, you'll be drawn into practising biblical self-talk about dryness in worship. I am confident that your worship will therefore be different.

David not only starts Psalm 103 with 'Praise the Lord, my soul'; he ends on the same note. This is the beginning, not the end, of praise which is never-ending. As Matthew Henry puts it:

*When we have done ever so much in the service of God, yet still we must stir ourselves up to do more. God's praise is a subject that will never be exhausted, and therefore we must never think that this work is done till we come to heaven when it will be forever.<sup>4</sup>*

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### Questions

What do you think of the idea of learning biblical self-talk to overcome problems with praise? Is it something you might benefit from? Are you listening to yourself rather than talking to yourself?

### SELF-TALK'S TWO FORMATS

#### Version one – listening to self

This is an inner dialogue of the kind we tend to have without always vocalising it:

I really don't feel like a quiet time.  
*You poor thing, tell me why?*  
I'm really tired.  
*Bad night?*  
And some.  
*[silence]*  
And I had one yesterday and the day before.  
*Gosh, that's good going.*  
And I don't want to get legalistic.  
*Absolutely not – avoid that like the plague.*  
And there's just too much to do today.  
*Like what?*

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Got to have a shower and wash my hair; get an online shop done so it comes after work; and do some admin – bills, emails and stuff. Then it's a normal work day but I'm seeing Judy for lunch (and that's going to take loads out of me). Then I've Bible study this evening and then my mother needs a call ...

*You're really overloaded. Best give it a miss?*

#### Version two – talking to self

This is an inner dialogue where we choose to use words to talk to ourselves!

I really don't feel like a quiet time.  
*Not nice but how much do feelings come into it?*  
Well, I'm tired and really busy.  
*OK but does that make some sort of quiet time more or less of a good idea?*  
God can get by without me, can't he?  
*That's not really the point, is it?*  
What do you mean?  
*Surely the main point is that God is great and simply deserves your praise?*  
I know, I know.  
*And even if he can get along without you, can you really get*

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*along without him on such a busy day when you're feeling wrung out?*

Well ...

*[interrupting] I mean surely this is the sort of situation when what you need most of all is to remind yourself how great God is ...*

Yes but ...

*[interrupting again] and tell him how much you need him so you can cope with Judy at lunchtime without getting fed up with her.*

OK but I really can't spend ages working out all the words in my Bible text and praying halfway through the house group email prayer update.

*Sure. It may not be the day for that. But what about saying Psalm 103:1-2 to yourself, reading your Bible chapter thoughtfully, saying the Lord's Prayer meaningfully and then asking for help for today's pinch points?*

OK.

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### When I feel too rubbish for God

Here is a part-imagined, part-real conversation with a friend:

How're things? I'm feeling unbearably irritable with any human being I meet. Sometimes it's the near to unbearable weight of just being me.

*Oh brother, I'm so sorry. I know it well. I call those my hate-the-world days. Had one yesterday.*

Thanks. That helps. I wish I loved the human race. I wish I loved its stupid face. I wish I loved the way it walks. I wish I loved the way it talks. And when I'm introduced to one, I wish I thought: 'What jolly fun.' But what do I do?

*Have you tried talking to God about it?*

He's the last person I feel I can go to.

*Why?*

Because I am so horrible.

*And?*

I don't want him to see how horrible I am.

*Is that logical?*

What do you mean?

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*If he's God, he can see it already.*

Yeah, I know. But I can't see him seeing me. Whereas if I start praying about how I feel, then I will be more aware of it and I'll feel worse.

*Have you tried the prayer of self-surrender?<sup>1</sup>*

Is this more of that trendy stuff?

*Trendy? Me?*

Ha. Go on then.

*There's a lot in the Bible about offering ourselves to God. Paul says we should offer our bodies as living sacrifices in Romans 12:1. A bit earlier, in Romans 6:15–23, he talks about offering every part of ourselves as instruments of righteousness.*

That's exactly the problem. I'm not an instrument of righteous tunes; I am an instrument badly out of tune. It feels as though I have notes too high and low for the human ear which are uglier still.

*Do you want to give this a go or not?*

OK. What do I do then?

*Find a place to be quiet. Ideally this would be a physical place but you may need to make a quiet space inside your mind.*

Right, I'm on my own and the radio is off.

*And your phone! Now sit (or lie) quietly and open yourself to God's eyes.*

How?

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*Look at him as you look deep inside yourself. Be attentive to the rubbish you find. Go beneath what you wish you were. Go down to what you are worried about. Pay attention to the things about you (or your life) that are disappointing. Or that make you feel ashamed.*

Yup. There's quite a lot there.

*Make sure you are moving towards God, or allowing yourself to be aware that he is looking at you. Tell him that you are not what you want to be or should be, and that you know that.*

OK. Feels like a start.

*You may want to go deeper still.*

Why?

*Because none of us really knows or understands ourselves. We just can't. It's partly because we are finite beings with finite knowledge. We have deeper inner capacities than we have the ability to know. So it is like a dog trying to understand how a television works.*

Gosh.

*It's also because we have all sorts of inner cloaking devices that hide our true selves from ourselves.*

Like defence mechanisms – denial and so on?

*Exactly. Freud got that spot on.*

Good old Lucien.

*Sigmund!*

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So what do I do?

*How do you feel about not knowing all that is going on deep inside you that produces your excessive anxiety, your overwork?*

Embarrassed. Frustrated. Annoyed.

OK. Now move towards God, realising – and this is really important – that he knows you perfectly.

I find it hard to make that move.

*Look at the cross. Remember God's promise to put us right with him through Jesus.*

OK, I'm trying.

*How does that feel?*

We may be getting somewhere.

*Move towards him in faith, bringing all that you are and surrendering yourself to him for help because you cannot help yourself and you have nowhere else to go.*

I could have a drink or eat some chocolate.

*Will they really help?*

Nope. I could look at some porn.

*Oh yeah?*

I know that would be sinful. I could watch a box set. I've this new one I've almost finished.

*Sounds like that will really deal with your problems ...*

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OK, I could ... if I could just pick up my phone and ...

*Hah! And what? Did your phone die for you? Is God on Facebook or Instagram?*

But my phone, well, it's just ...

Yes?

It's what I turn to when I feel lousy or bored or fed up. It's what I was doing when I saw you were online – so there you go!

*Yes, but we are talking on your landline now – and your phone is in the next room.*

I have nowhere else to go but God.

*So why not talk to him?*

What, over the phone?

*Well, I'm happy to listen and help if you want.*

Definitely. OK, here goes:

Lord, it's not great that I am coming to you as my last resort but that's what you are here. Even that makes me realise how messed up I am inside and how little I really get myself.

Why have I been so horrible to people in the last 24 hours? Why have I had such critical reactions to people who were just trying their best? I really don't want to be like this but something deep inside – that is me but isn't me – seems to take over.