



NAC-USA
DEVELOPMENT
INSTITUTE

Praise

Authority
and Rapture

Willingness
to Reconcile

MIDWEEK SCRIPT

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Session 1: Praise

Welcome. Today we're going to explore the concept of "praise" – what is praise? Why should we praise? And how can we praise God?

Christ's law is based on loving God and loving our neighbor, and when we praise God, we are showing that we love Him with all our heart, soul, and mind. As we will discuss in this session, praise is one of the purposes of our lives, and is a natural result of loving God with our whole being.

So, what is praise? The dictionary offers two definitions:

1. to express admiration of; extol.
2. to offer grateful reverence to, as in words or song; to worship.

To praise God is to call attention to who He is. And God has called us to this purpose. In Isaiah 43 we read, "This people I have formed for Myself; they shall declare My praise." This calling of praise wasn't just meant for the Israelites, but God also designated the Church to proclaim His praises, as we read in 1 Peter 2:9:

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

The Catechism emphasizes two important purposes of the church: making salvation accessible to all people, and bringing worship and praise to God. In giving praise to God, a Christian aligns themselves with the purposes of God. In addition to fulfilling the purposes of God, praise can be prompted by the unique nature of God, His self-revelation to us through deliverance and favor, the incarnation of His Son, and can be born out of the love we feel for God that develops through our relationship with Him.

We can find many examples of praise in the Bible. The Hebrew term for the Psalms translates as "praises" – so let's start there. You will go through some of the Psalms in your guide later, but let's look at what makes up a "psalm of praise" – Psalm 146.

I'll read a few excerpts for you:

Praise the Lord, O my soul!

While I live I will praise the Lord;

Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help,

Who made heaven and earth,

The sea, and all that is in them;

Who keeps truth forever,

Who executes justice for the oppressed,

Who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord gives freedom to the prisoners.

The Lord opens the eyes of the blind;

The Lord raises those who are bowed down;

*The Lord loves the righteous.
But the way of the wicked He turns upside down.
The Lord shall reign forever—
Your God, O Zion, to all generations.
Praise the Lord!*

What can we learn about God through this psalm of praise? God is a Creator, a Righteous Judge, a Provider. He lifts up the oppressed and the burdened. He performs miracles. He is a King. When we praise God we start to see His magnificence, His greatness, how big He is, and how small we are. And what effect could that have on our lives? Perhaps knowing God as a Provider will increase our trust in Him when we are struggling or in need. Knowing He is a King makes us think about how He should be ruling in our lives. When we hear that He lifts up those that are bowed down, we feel His comfort and His love.

If we make praise a priority in our lives, it could have a profound effect on our relationship with God. How then are we to praise God? Like other areas of Christian life, rich times of prayer and praise come through learning principles and putting them into practice. Here are a few thoughts:

Use precise language: Spend a few minutes a day praising God for who He is. In this exercise, do not use the word "praise." This will force you to say what you really mean without using a word that could be somewhat vague. In this exercise, do not use the word "thanks." We thank God for what He has done; we praise Him for who He is. Avoiding the word "thanks" will help you focus on praise. Begin your sentences with the word "You" – this will help us focus on God, not ourselves, as the subject of praise.

Use the names of God: As we went through Psalm 146, we came up with specific names of God; Creator, Judge, and Provider. Spend a few minutes identifying the different names of God, and to further this idea, follow each with a statement defining the name. This might also reveal to us how well we know God.

Use Scriptures: Learn to use portions of Scripture that are expressions of praise. These can be read or prayed over. You can find a short list in your guide to get you started.

Praise Him with music: Hebrews 2 says, *I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You.* Great hymns of faith can be an important element of musical praise. The next time you join in a hymn, really think about the words and what they tell you about who God is.

Find praise in the ordinary: Let's read the Message paraphrase of Romans 12: 1-2 to get a better understanding of this:

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering...Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out.

When we intentionally look for God in the ordinary and mundane, we will begin to find Him everywhere. Yes, in church on Sunday at 10:30am, but also in the grocery store on Tuesday. In a business meeting, or the colors of a sunset. Every moment is an opportunity for praise and we can choose to participate in it. That is what we were made for.

Session 2: Authority and Rapture

Our theme for this month is the law of Christ and in this session we will focus on the lives of Elijah and Elisha. They displayed their love for God and for others through their obedience to the will of God. Both prophets served God without knowing what their reward would be and both experienced God's blessing in their lives. Now, let's take a deeper look into the lives of these two men.

In the Old Testament books, 1st and 2nd Kings, we can learn about the lives of the prophets Elijah and Elisha. When we are first introduced to Elijah in 1 Kings, he is relaying a message from God to Ahab, the king of Israel, about a drought that was going to afflict the land. Elijah said, "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve." In this introduction we learn about the heart of Elijah and how reverently he looked up to God, and throughout his life we can read how obedient he was to all that God asked him to do even when Elijah was pushed into deep despair by his enemies. Elisha was Elijah's successor and he worked to live a life that reflected his mentor's. Before Elijah's departure from the earth, he asked Elisha if there was anything that he could do for him. Elisha asked to "inherit a double portion of your spirit." In the Message paraphrase it says, "Your life repeated in my life. I want to be a holy man just like you." As the Scripture tells the story of Elisha in 2 Kings, we can see that he was successful in continuing the work of Elijah.

There are many events in the lives of these two prophets that are unique and interesting and can serve as examples for us in our lives. In this session we will focus on two events that they both were involved in: Elijah placing his mantle (cloak) on Elisha and Elijah being caught up to heaven.

In 1 Kings 19 we can read that Elijah is experiencing a time of retreat. His fellow prophets have been put to death and his life was being threatened, so he retreated to Mount Horeb where God would speak to him. Elijah recognized Him in the simple voice. God was in the wind, earthquake, and fire, but Elijah recognized Him in the voice that brought him encouragement and comfort – and we can recognize Him like that too, in the small things. Elijah is instructed by God on what steps to take next, including anointing Elisha as his successor. Acting in obedience to the plan of God, Elijah sets out to find Elisha and meets him in a field walking behind a team of oxen and a plow. Not exactly the place you expect the next prophet to be found, but Elijah walks right up to Elisha and places his mantle on him, anointing him as his successor. This sudden change in life direction was probably a surprise for Elisha, as it would be for most of us, but he drops the plow and runs after Elijah and makes one request – "Please let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." Elijah allows him to go back with encouragement not to forget what was just placed on him. Elisha then does more than just kiss his parents, he kills the

oxen, burns the plow, and throws a farewell feast. In these actions, Elisha demonstrates his acceptance of what God has called him to. He destroys his means of living and the tools of his old life, showing that there was no turning back.

What are the plows and oxen in your life that are holding you back from accepting God's calling for your life? Perhaps you may feel forgotten by God or that there is nothing for you to do in His work. Be assured that God knows you and has a distinct purpose for you to serve in His mission. Is it time to burn your plow and push the oxen out of the way so that you can embrace what God has called you to do?

Let's fast forward to the end of Elijah and Elisha's time together on earth. In the 2nd Chapter of 2nd Kings we can read about this experience. At the beginning of the chapter, there are a series of similar events. Elijah travels with his successor to 3 different cities and in each place he tries to leave Elisha behind, but he refuses to leave his mentor. In each place the local prophets ask Elisha, "Do you know that the Lord will take away your master from over you today?" However, he remained steadfast in his desire to stay with Elijah. Finally, at the river Jordan, the time came when Elijah would be caught up to heaven by God. In response to Elisha's request for a double portion of his spirit, Elijah told him that if he is able to witness what was about to happen, then he would receive what he asked for. This request of Elisha showed his desire to do great things for God, and the Bible tells us that after the fiery chariot came to take Elijah away, Elisha picked up his cloak and began his work as the prophet of Israel.

There are two things that we can take away from this experience. First, Elisha's earnest desire to remain with his mentor and then to do great things for God just as Elijah did. This brings to mind that our greatest teacher and mentor is Jesus. He has placed His mantle onto the Church to fulfill His work and spread the Gospel. Do we have a fervent desire to stay with Jesus Christ and do great things in His name? Do we have the desire to be like Him and demonstrate our love for God and those around us through our words, actions, and obedience?

A second takeaway is Elijah's reward for his obedience and faithful service to God. God provided Elijah with this great blessing of being caught up by a fiery chariot and being taken to heaven. He did not have to see death. This event ties closely with Jesus's ascension and the rapture that we are looking to and preparing for. The rapture is the event when a group of believers will meet the Lord at His return, as written about in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17: *For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.*

The rapture will be an act of grace opened to those who have lived their lives in obedience and service to God and will be granted the blessing of being saved from the time of tribulation. The resurrection of the dead that occurs at the rapture is considered by the New Apostolic Church to be a part of the First Resurrection, which also includes the resurrection of the martyrs that die during the Tribulation. Is the moment of the rapture something you are looking forward to? How can the life of Elijah and Elisha be used as encouragement for us to remain with God and live obediently for Him every day?

Session 3: Willingness to Reconcile

Welcome to our last small group session of February. This month we've heard about praise and our calling in connection with the law of Christ. In this session we will continue exploring Christ's command to love God and our neighbor through the willingness to reconcile.

There are two types of reconciliation: reconciliation with God and with our neighbor. If we can better understand how our reconciliation with God works, then we can comprehend the importance of reconciliation with our neighbor. In order to get a better grasp on both types of reconciliation, let's look at the parable of the unforgiving servant. Please pause the video to read Matthew 18:21-35.

In Jesus' parable we can study the relationship between the servant and his master. When finally called to settle his accounts, the servant begs for his master's patience so that he can gather the money to pay his debt – which was so large that it was going to be impossible to pay. However, the master has compassion and forgives his entire debt. The servant was never going to be able to repay the large sum he owed to his master, and yet, perhaps he wanted to try out of his pride. Every sin we commit is a debt to God and this is why we are unreconciled with Him. It's foolish to think that, as sinners, we could try to satisfy God by "paying" back our debts to Him. He sent His Son so that Christ's "once brought, eternally valid sacrifice" could erase our debt and allow us to be reconciled with God once again; there is nothing we ourselves can do to reconcile ourselves with God. So why does He forgive us over and over again? His mercy and compassion are so great that if we are repentant and humble before God, He grants us reconciliation.

Because we have experienced God's mercy, we need to become an example of and allow others to experience His mercy by forgiving when wrongs have been committed against us.

Before Jesus relays the parable, Peter asks if he must forgive up to seven times. How many times do we forgive somebody before we think "enough is enough"? Jesus tells Peter that we must forgive "up to seventy times seven." We can imagine that Jesus didn't mean to set up a new number of times that we must forgive a person; rather, we must keep forgiving so often that it becomes a part of our nature. Jesus commands that we forgive our brother and sister and extend the grace that God has abundantly given us. However, as the end of the parable says, our forgiveness has to come from our hearts if we want to please God. If we cannot forgive and do it sincerely, we will be judged quite harshly and face consequences from Him. And if our ability to forgive has a limit or is not done with the desire for true reconciliation, then can we ask for God's grace and forgiveness? In order to preserve love, reconciliation must become a crucial element in our relationships with each other.

In the parable, the servant would not forgive his fellow servant the small debt owed to him, which was a small fraction of what the servant owed to the master in comparison. Instead, he "went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt." This suggests that the servant had a greater love for his money than he did for his servant, even though his master had showed him mercy and love by forgiving his much larger debt. Do you hold something in higher value than the love for your neighbor?

We see that forgiveness is a necessity in reconciliation, so let's review what it means for us to forgive our neighbor. First, we cannot seek revenge on someone who has wronged us. We also cannot ask that God punishes those who have hurt us. Next, we should not reproach the person for their wrong or even bring it up again. Lastly, we hope that the person finds salvation and forgiveness in Christ. Only God can erase the sin, but we are able to do these things.

Do you accept that God extends mercy to those that have wronged you in the same way that He has shown mercy to you? Are you okay with them being forgiven? We must be willing to forgive and let go of our neighbor's sins against us.

If we can do this, then we show that we truly believe in and follow the Gospel. Through this willingness to reconcile, we can show our love for our neighbor and for our God.

Please turn to your guides for discussion questions.