

“Praising God—from A to Z”

Psalm 145:8-14

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer

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When I was a grade school boy growing up in a small county seat town in rural America, Saturday afternoons always found me at the movie theater. Mom would give me a quarter for the price of admission and a dime for refreshments. (Prices have gone up a bit since then.) My favorite part of the matinee was the fifteen-minute serial that preceded the feature film. From week to week, I looked forward with great anticipation to the next installment of the serial—Roy Rogers, or Batman, or some other heroic character.

Anticipation is a wonderful thing. Perhaps you have felt a bit of anticipation this past week. As you will recall, last Sunday I began telling you “the rest of the story” about the well-known hymn, “It Is Well with My Soul,” but half-way through, I stopped abruptly, saying that you’d have to wait until today to hear “the *rest* of the rest of the story.”

As you will recall, Horatio Spafford—a prominent lawyer and long-time church elder and Sunday School teacher—wrote “It Is Well with My Soul” after the loss of his four daughters and near-loss of his wife, Anna, in a shipwreck in the middle of the Atlantic. And as if that weren’t enough of a tragedy to bear, Horatio’s and Anna’s theologically-confused and unloving church treated them as spiritual pariahs, expelling them from the congregation, thinking that there must be something evil about them or God wouldn’t have inflicted such a heavy punishment on them. (What sick theology!) But rather than turning their backs on God, the Spaffords and a number of their fellow parishioners who left the church with them, started a prayer meeting at the Spafford’s house. I concluded last week’s story by saying that what grew out of that prayer meeting is truly amazing—a phenomenal work of God. So now, it’s time for the *rest* of the rest of the story.

In 1881, eight years after the tragedy, the Spaffords, together with sixteen members of their prayer group, who called themselves “The Overcomers,” felt led to move to Jerusalem where they settled together in a house in the Old City. Believing that the return of Christ was imminent—like many Christians in the late 19th century—their goal was to live like the first Christians in Jerusalem had done: a simple life with everything held in common and focused on serving other people.

With their charitable door open at all times to their Arab and Jewish neighbors, they soon established good relations with the local population because of their many acts of benevolence and assistance. The local Arabs and Jews referred to them simply as “the American Colony,” and the name stuck.

After Horatio’s death in 1888, Anna became the Colony’s spiritual leader, and following a trip back home to Chicago to raise funds for their charitable work, 70 Swedish Americans

decided to join the American Colony in 1894, followed two years later by another 55 Christians from Sweden. Obviously, the greatly expanded commune required much larger facilities, so the Colony bought a very large home outside Jerusalem, a home which had initially been built as a palace for a pasha—a high-ranking official in the Ottoman Empire, which, you may recall had controlled the Holy Lands for centuries.

The Colony quickly became known locally as a neutral island, remaining outside the turbulent politics of the land. Because of their neutrality, they were able to continue their charitable works—i.e., hospital, school, feeding the hungry, caring for orphans—throughout the chaotic days of World War I, and the fall of the Ottoman Empire; during the inter-war years of the British Mandate of Palestine, and the increased Zionist immigration; throughout the dark days of World War II; and during the turbulent founding of the modern state of Israel and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that has continued to this day. Owned by neither Arabs nor Jews, but by Americans and Swedes, the Colony has always been friends with all sectors of Jerusalem's mixed society. For over a century now, it has provided a peaceful oasis where Jews, Muslim-Arabs, and Christian-Arabs can comfortably meet and work toward peace in the Middle East.

Now I'm sure that the practical-minded among us this morning have a question? How has the Colony been able to finance not only itself, but also its growing number of charitable works? Early on, it looked for ways to become self-sufficient—such as establishing a working farm and selling food and textiles—but soon the Colony embarked on two creative ventures that have had a lasting impact: first, photography of the Holy Lands, and second, turning the former palace into a hotel for travelers to the Holy Lands.

Pioneers in the photography of the Holy Lands, the Colony's remarkable photographers detailed the history of Jerusalem and the surrounding territory during the decades of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their photographs were wildly popular, appearing in leading publications like *National Geographic* and *Life* magazine, and numerous scholarly and travel books on the Holy Lands. Today, many of those artistic photographs are currently on display in the Library of Congress in Washington, as well as in the Colony's own archives.

In the opening years of the 20th century, the former pasha's palace was transformed into the American Colony Hotel, which quickly became a favorite haven for archaeologists, pilgrims to the Holy Lands, international journalists, and diplomats from across the world. The Hotel remains a favorite of travelers to Jerusalem today.

The Colony's original home in the Old City has continued to serve as the center for the Colony's charitable work, providing care to the needy—especially children—with a range of services that have grown over the decades. Today, the Colony's original building houses the Spafford Children's Center, which runs a school, a hospital and clinic, as well as offices for infant welfare and social work for needy local Arab and Jewish children. And, yes, descendants of Horatio and Anna Spafford still run the Children's Center.¹

Wow, what an amazing family legacy of compassionate service in Christ's name to those in need, especially to "the least of these" as Jesus phrased it. But how were Horatio and Anna able to overcome their personal tragedy and move on in Christ-like service to others? They accomplished this spiritual transformation by seeking to embody an attitude of praise and gratitude found in scripture passages like today's Psalter lesson: Psalm 145.

Last week, we looked at Psalm 13, a personal lament, which no doubt accurately reflected the Spafford's initial experience following their personal tragedy. But as you will recall, Psalm 13 takes readers from where they are, "singing the blues," to where they want to be, "praising the Lord."

Psalm 145 is a beautiful song of praise. There are many songs of praise in the Psalter, of course, but Psalm 145 is special. It is an acrostic psalm; that is, each successive verse in the psalm begins with the next letter of the alphabet—A in verse 1, B in verse 2, C in verse 3, and so forth, or in the original Hebrew, *Alef, Beth, Gimel*, and so forth. In addition to being an eye-catching literary device, the alphabetic structure no doubt helped people memorize the psalm. But far more important, the alphabetic structure makes a *theological* point. The psalmist wanted to praise God using *all* the words that exist. Obviously, that is not literally possible, but all words that exist *are* formed from the alphabet. So, by using the letters of the alphabet to structure the psalm, the author was literally "praising God from A to Z"—or in Hebrew, from *Alef* to *Tau*. Pretty cool, huh?²

I'd like for us to reflect upon some of the words the psalmist used in this song "praising the Lord." He chose some marvelous words.

In verse 8, God is described as "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Some scholars translate the Hebrew word for mercy by the English words "pity" or "kind and tender." The expression "slow to anger" is sometimes translated as "very patient," or my preference, "longsuffering"; that is, God does not have a short fuse but rather bears with our many shortcomings. God believes in us. The psalmist then used one of the most important words in the entire Old Testament to describe God: "steadfast love." The Hebrew word *hesed* is rich in meaning: it is variously translated "steadfast love," "loving kindness," "faithful love," "constant love," "unfailing love." God's love is *unconditional* and *never-ending*.

Verse 9 continues in this lofty vein: "The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made." God's attitude toward us, and all creation, is best captured in the word "compassion." Hebrew word for compassion is derived from a root meaning "womb." Thus, to be compassionate is to be "womb-like." A woman feels compassion for the child of her womb. What the womb is to a developing fetus, compassion is to the one who receives it. Not surprisingly, then, the word compassion bears nuances of life-giving, nourishing, caring for, and embracing.

There is one more word I would like for us to reflect upon this morning. The center of Psalm 145 is verses 11-13. Interestingly, these verses begin with the letters *Caph, Lamed*, and

Mem, or in English K, L, and M. If you reverse those letters you get, *Mem, Lamed, Caph*—the letters that form the word *melek*, or in English, “king.” These letters no doubt spurred David, *King of Israel* (to whom this psalm is attributed), to think of God as *King of the Universe*, for you find one word appearing four times in these three verses: the word “kingdom.”

*They shall speak of the glory of your **kingdom**, and tell of your power, to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your **kingdom**. Your **kingdom** is an everlasting **kingdom**, and your dominion endures throughout all generations.*

Unfortunately, the English word “kingdom” does not capture the meaning of the Hebrew word. The English word kingdom suggests a **static** realm or place, whereas the Hebrew word suggests the **active** reign or rule of a king. In the Bible, God’s kingdom is not a realm, not a place; on the contrary, God’s kingdom refers to God’s *saving power*, God’s *redemptive activity* on behalf of all creation. God’s kingdom is God’s *loving power*, God’s *mighty deeds* on our behalf, mighty deeds that, as the psalmist put it, continue to “uphold all who are falling”—that raise up “all who are bowed down”—“throughout all generations.”

King David knew that the primary work of a king in the Ancient Near Eastern world was ensuring that *all* people had a peaceful and prosperous life. As King of the Universe, that is God’s primary work as well—to work for our well-being. And as David wrote, God is continually carrying out this work of being gracious, merciful, patient, steadfast in love, good, and compassionate toward all.

Just as King David understood himself to be the hands and feet of God in Israel in his day, so we, too, should understand ourselves as the hands and feet of Christ—charged with carrying on Christ’s compassionate work in our day. Horatio and Anna Spafford understood this. Their deep and abiding commitment to make their hands and feet, the hands and feet of Christ in the world not only allowed them to overcome tragedy and sing “It Is Well with My Soul”; it also led them to establish the American Colony in Jerusalem, whose compassionate Christ-like service to “the least of these” continues to this day.

Is it well with your soul? Have you committed your hands and feet to being the hands and feet of Christ today? That is how we can best praise God from A to Z.

And that is today’s good news. Amen.

¹ Library of Congress, *The American Colony in Jerusalem* (Web). The American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem (Web). The History of the American Colony in Jerusalem (Web).

² Actually, Psalm 145 is missing the letter *Nun*. (Did some scribe make an error in copying?) This is why Psalm 145 contains 21 verses instead of 22.