

The ABCs of God

Psalm 145

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

November 10, 2013

What do you think God is like? Or, to put it another way, how do you think the world works? Is the world pretty much a random place where stuff just happens to people, or is there some kind of benevolent force behind it all? How you think about God shapes the cognitive and emotional world that you live in—whether it's a world suited to fear or to love, whether paranoia makes sense or generosity makes sense.

The second *Thor* movie just came out. It's a stretch to say that it's based on Norse mythology—Thor is turned into a superhero rather than a god—but it is a reminder that people have had all kinds of ideas about how the world worked, and what the God or gods were like. As you've seen in the advertising, Thor is a strong guy who wields a big hammer. For people in Germanic countries 2000 years ago, he was real; he was the thunder god. He swung that hammer and the lightning came down. Thor was the god of storms and oak trees and destruction. Thor's chariot is pulled by two *goats* named Toothgnasher and Toothgrinder, but sometimes Thor gets hungry and he has to eat the goats. Kind of like running out of gas. But Thor gathers together their bones and scraps of their flesh and with his magic hammer resurrects them.

Thor's father is Odin, the most powerful god, a *war* god. One of his other sons is Loki, the trickster god who is a shape-shifter and troublemaker, who kills Baldr, the good-looking son who was the god of light and the only good guy in the bunch.

Now if that is your religion, what does that say about your view of the world? It means that the world is a dangerous place. The gods who run things are mean and selfish. The best you can hope for is to placate them. Now, in some ways the religion of Thor and his family offers a more plausible answer to the problem of evil than our own faith. Why do innocent people suffer? Because the gods are evil. That makes sense.

How does this relate to Psalm 145? That kind of religion of unpredictable, mean-spirited, and sex-obsessed gods was the same kind of religion that surrounded Israel when it proclaimed that Yahweh was the one God. You can see that if you think of Greek mythology, but it's also true about the religions of Babylon and Assyria, and the Ba'al religion of Israel's immediate neighbors. In Thursday night Bible study we skimmed through the history of the kings of Israel and Judah after the time of Solomon. About 80% of the kings were absolutely terrible and led the people away from the worship of Yahweh as one God and took them into the fertility cult of Ba'al.

Ba'al was a thunder god like Thor. He was a son of El, the original god, but Ba'al killed his father so that he could sleep with his mother, Asherah. See, if you try to develop theology that mirrors the real world, you get gods that inhabit a soap opera in the sky. And what you learn from that is that the world is really messed up, and the best you can hope for is to placate the idiots in the sky or trick them into blessing you with fertility by doing magic rituals. The Jewish kings built temples to Ba'al which were filled with male sexual prostitutes who were supposed to help you connect with this god, and they put up giant phallic poles which were supposed to attract Asherah to come down to pleasure herself. If that's your theology, what is your life like? How do you find peace or learn how to live?

It's against that background that the psalmists were writing songs about the one true God, Yahweh, the Lord. Against the background of worldviews like the Thor worldview or the Ba'al worldview, you have these beautiful statements about the real God's goodness and righteousness, his love and compassion, his care for all his creatures. If your cognitive reality and your emotional reality are being shaped day after day by Psalm 145 and that picture of what God is like, the world is a completely different place than the world experienced by a pagan. It seems to me that even in the 21st century we have a lot of neighbors who are essentially pagan. That is, they are clueless about the real God and live in a world where random, meaningless events are the norm; no wonder they live to party. What else is there? When their friends die, what can they say?

Psalm 145 happens to be the assigned lectionary psalm for today, but the more I read it through the more I was impressed by the theology. It's often said that we learn more of our theology from hymns than from sermons, and it certainly seems true that the book of Psalms is the most theological book in the Bible. Where else do you find as many clear statements about God's nature? Some postmodern preachers value stories as the only way to talk about God at all, but I think poetry has a good shot at getting through to us.

This poem is an impressive work of art simply because it is an acrostic. The poet or songwriter set himself the task of going through the whole alphabet (or as Jews call it, the aleph beth), starting each couplet with the appropriate letter. The idea is that this is a comprehensive statement about Yahweh, Yahweh from A to Z. The word "all" or "every" occurs 17 times, because this God is complete and not partial. To weave all these statements and pictures of God into the frame of the alphabet is an artistic accomplishment like a cross-stitch sampler or the Block Island Quilt. Psalm 145 is a beautiful thing.

But this psalm has been especially precious to Jews. We know that Psalm 145 was the first psalm to be incorporated into the liturgy developed after the destruction of the Temple. According to the Talmud, the 4th century Rabbi Eleazar said "Everyone who repeats [Psalm 145] three times a day may be sure that he is a child of the world to come." No doubt that motivated some people to memorize this one, to be guaranteed life in Messiah's kingdom. Even today, many Orthodox recite this psalm three times a day. It appears more in the modern Jewish Prayer Book than any other psalm.

It begins with an introduction, a statement of intention. "I will extol you...I will bless you...and praise your name forever." Why? Because Yahweh is great; his greatness is unsearchable—beyond our comprehension. The first six verses sound that note of greatness: mighty acts, glorious splendor, majesty, awesome deeds. When we think of God, that is the first note that needs to be sounded. First, God is great; then, God is good. First, we remind ourselves that we are coming into the presence of a magnificent and glorious being, the source of all being, the one for whom nothing is impossible. Then, we remind ourselves that this Lord is gracious, compassionate, loving, and generous. If you have a kind God and think of Jesus as your friend, but they are not powerful beyond understanding, then it's not all that helpful. They become like your grandpa and your best friend standing up to a tsunami.

J. I. Packer wrote in his classic little book, *Knowing God*, in 1973:

The Christian instincts of trust and worship are stimulated very powerfully by knowledge of the greatness of God. But this is knowledge which Christians today largely lack, and that is the reason our faith is so feeble and our worship so flabby. We are modern men, and modern men, though they cherish great thoughts of man, have as a rule small thoughts of God.

One of the purposes of the psalms—and of Bible reading in general—and of singing hymns like the ones we are singing today—is to give us great thoughts of God.

The psalmist promises to meditate on Yahweh's wondrous works. When we hear that we may think of the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls, or Block Island and the sea. Those are certainly evidence of the Lord's power. But the psalmist is probably thinking about things that God has done in history, in human lives. When Hebrew writers use phrases like "mighty acts" and "awesome deeds," it refers back to the Passover celebration when those are retold: the mighty acts of Yahweh when he defeated Pharaoh and brought the slaves out of Egypt and eventually into the Promised Land. For a Jew, that is *the* story, as for us the Cross is *the* story, the story of salvation.

The Passover haggadah (the liturgy) reminds us that we do not tell the story as if it happened to someone else, because it was for *us* that God did these things, not only for an earlier generation. Each generation, this psalm says, retells the story to the next, and teaches the younger ones to praise Yahweh. It's probably wise not to equate our American story with Israel's, but each of our families has a story, or multiple stories, of coming to this country—and often they are stories about how God brought them here safely. Each of us has individual stories about how God brought us here, how God brought us together with the ones we love, how God called us to himself in faith. Those are the mighty deeds we celebrate, remembering that what God did for you or me he did for the whole church that we might praise him together.

In verses 8-9, which begin with the letters *heth* and *teth*, you get the first real statements about what God is like, what Yahweh's inner nature is. The psalmist repeats first the words that were given to Moses when Yahweh passed by him and revealed himself while Moses hid in a crack in a great rock: "I am Yahweh," he said, "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abiding in steadfast love." Then the psalmist adds: Yahweh is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.

God is not just good to Jews or Christians. He is good to all. He has compassion not only on us, but on them—those people out there, even our enemies. The universal breadth of that statement is amazing. The Hebrew word used there for compassion has at its root the word for "womb." It speaks of a mother's tenderness. The King James translates it "tender mercies." The astounding message here is that God's power is shown in motherly love. That's the way God's power works with us.

This is of course what Jesus was saying. Then as now a lot of people who said they believed in God still had a pagan view of God as someone to be scared of, someone to placate, a God of harsh justice who throws down lightning bolts on those with whom he is displeased. You saw that in all the jokes made when lightning struck the church, right? But honestly, don't you think a lot of people think of God, if they ever think of God, as someone more like Thor or Zeus or Ba'al than like this God of mercy, steadfast love, and compassion—the God also revealed to us in Jesus? Jesus wasn't saying anything new about God's nature; he was just taking us back to the scriptures and then demonstrating that kind of love in his life.

But in verses 11-13 of this psalm we get back to the greatness side of the equation. These verses talk about the power and the glory and especially the kingdom. Yahweh is now addressed directly as "You." "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. For your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations." These three verses start with the letters KLM; if you read them backwards that spells MLK, *melek*, the word for king. That's no accident. Very cool, huh?

For us, all this kingdom talk may seem archaic. We're not into kings. But if you are living under a bad government, the idea that Yahweh the compassionate is going to take over the world, that is good news. Many scholars think that this psalm was written after Jerusalem had been conquered and there was no more king of Israel. The great news is that the kingdom of Alexander, or the Roman Empire, or even the government in Washington is not forever. What is forever is the government of Yahweh the compassionate. Maybe that gives you an idea why Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God. He wasn't proclaiming heaven. He was announcing that God was actually in charge of the world and that the God of forgiveness and compassion and generosity wants us to live in his reality rather than the reality shaped by Caesar or Thor.

But the idea of kingdom is not the last idea in the psalm. The psalmist, just like Jesus, wants to make clear what that kingdom means. It is not the rule of a despot. It is the rule of grace and mercy. The NRSV translates the second half of verse 13 "The Lord is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds." Did you notice how it read in the Jerusalem Bible? "Always true to his promises, Yahweh shows compassion in all he does." Then follows a series of examples: Yahweh catches us when we fall, he straightens us up when we are bent over with heavy loads. He gives food to all his creatures, satisfying the desires of every living thing. (Will he not much more care for you, o ye of little faith?) The Lord is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings (NRSV)—or as the Jerusalem has it, "Righteous in all he does, Yahweh acts only out of love."

Man, if we could get that through our heads the world in which we live would be different for us: the Lord acts only out of love. It's not the case that God's righteousness is in tension with his love. It's not that the Great and Powerful Yahweh is defined by anything other than compassion. The rabbis have a term for this: "the combination of *shem* and *malchus*." The first word is Shem—the Name—because the very name Yahweh signifies as it did for Moses that God is merciful. The second word Malchus (an MLK word) for Kingship, which represents his mastery and judgment. One rabbi in Baltimore [Avraham Cohen] says that this psalm is "the integration of God as Master and Creator and also intimately involved in our lives."

You see, God's reign *is* compassion. God's way of exercising power is what we saw in Jesus, giving himself as a servant to achieve reconciliation. The Lord is not King on the one hand and Savior on the other. He is not justice vs. mercy inside himself. God did not used to be law and then become grace. Yahweh is compassionate in all he does. The kingdom that Jesus came to bring is the kingdom of compassion and the triumph of love. That's such a wonderful thing! Let's live in *that* world!