

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Online Bible Study Starter

Psalm 146 – Whose Hope is in the LORD their God, who keeps faith forever

*Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul!
I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.
When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.
Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God,
who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever;
who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the
prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD
loves the righteous.
The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the
wicked he brings to ruin.
The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!*

This psalm of praise has a sharp edge in its contrast between Yahweh (the LORD) and powerful human beings (the “princes” it dismisses as unworthy of trust). This contrast has two parts, one stated and the other implied.

The stated contrast is between the princes’ plans which perish when they expel their final breaths and Yahweh’s faithfulness which endures forever (“who keeps faith forever”). They are mere human beings, for all their temporary power and glory. Yahweh is the Creator of the universe (heavens, earth, and sea). The inclusion of the sea may suggest that Yahweh is above all that seems chaotic to us, because the sea is often a symbol of chaos in the Bible, but this point is not emphasized directly. I mention it as a possibility because the psalm goes on to speak of people overwhelmed by life and powerless before its forces that push them down or toss them about.

The word “faith” in the clause, “who keeps faith forever,” comes from the same Hebrew root as “amen,” and its basic meaning has to do with the solid, reliable, enduring. It is “faithful” and “true,” but true in the relational sense we express in “true friend.” The psalms frequently use this word in pairing with another that means “steadfast love” and “covenant loyalty.” Some New Testament scholars suspect this pairing of words lies behind the Gospel of John’s statement (in Greek) about Jesus, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father’s only son, full of *grace and truth*.” (John 1:14, NRSV, alternate translation, “the Father’s only Son”).

The implied contrast, which gives the psalm its cutting edge, comes in the naming of those people for whom Yahweh God provides justice. They are the powerless in human society, too often

of little concern to the “princes”: the oppressed, the hungry, prisoners, the blind, those bowed down, the righteous, resident foreigners (translated here in NRSV as “strangers”), orphans, and widows. This naming sounds like a list of people of no political concern, no influence, and little use except to stir some sympathy or use as scapegoats.

Even when the society does not care, God does. Our God loves the discounted, the ignored, and the exploited. The imperative to make justice happen for these people who cannot make it happen for themselves is the measure of a leader or ruler. God does not look at campaigns won, projects built, power amassed, or glory taken to oneself; God judges a ruler or leader by the condition of the poor and powerless in the land under his/her administration and care.

This psalm and others like it echo in Jesus’ beatitudes (blessings) in Matthew 5 and Luke 6. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” (Luke 6:20b-21) He is not saying these people for whom life is very hard are virtuous; he is promising that God’s coming close means they will be blessed with deliverance and justice. This is what we are asking for when we pray, “Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is heaven.”

Compassion is the power of God. And, in God’s vocabulary, justice does not mean giving everyone what she or he deserves by some objective standard but, rather, giving people what God’s grace desires for them to have and to become. Grace is God’s standard.

Thought or Discussion Questions:

1. What is the difference between truth as an objective standard and truth as love’s reliability? A true statement and a true friend?
2. God loves the people who don’t count for much. Even when they are counted, it’s often for the benefit of others. Significant numbers of poor people bring in money, but the poor themselves spend a lot of time standing in lines or being told, “Sit over there and wait.” Some people have spoken of God’s (or the Bible’s) bias in favor of the poor. Is it a bias, or is that word ironic?
3. Toward which of their several children are good, loving parents “biased” at any given time?
4. What challenges might such a psalm put to a church? To individual Christians or Christian families?
5. Is this psalm comforting or troubling?