



VIRTUES FOR DISCIPLES

# HOPE

*An Anchor in Today's World*

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# *Introduction*

**Alive in the Word** brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each chapter.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume is one of several volumes that explore the theme **Virtues for Disciples**. Each of us is called to be a disciple, a follower of Christ. The life of a disciple is challenging but it is the most fulfilling way to live. Called by name by the God who created us, we are shaped by the teachings of Christ and continually guided by the Holy Spirit. As we grow more deeply into this identity as disciples of Jesus Christ, we discover the valuable virtues that mark God's people.

## *Flowing from Our Praise of God*



*Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read through the portion of Psalm 145 indicated here.*

### **Psalm 145:13b-21**

- <sup>13b</sup>The LORD is trustworthy in all his words,  
and loving in all his works.**
- <sup>14</sup>The LORD supports all who are falling  
and raises up all who are bowed down.**
- <sup>15</sup>The eyes of all look hopefully to you;  
you give them their food in due season.**
- <sup>16</sup>You open wide your hand  
and satisfy the desire of every living thing.**
- <sup>17</sup>The LORD is just in all his ways,  
merciful in all his works.**
- <sup>18</sup>The LORD is near to all who call upon him,  
to all who call upon him in truth.**
- <sup>19</sup>He fulfills the desire of those who fear him;  
he hears their cry and saves them.**
- <sup>20</sup>The LORD watches over all who love him,  
but all the wicked he destroys.**

<sup>21</sup>My mouth will speak the praises of the LORD;  
all flesh will bless his holy name forever and  
ever.

*After a few moments of quiet reflection on the psalm, consider the information provided in “Setting the Scene.” Occasional questions in the margin may be used for personal reflection or journaling, or may be used for group discussion.*

### *Setting the Scene*

The book of Psalms, a book of prayer songs of the Jewish people, touches all of human life: its joys and sorrows, doubts and beliefs, worries and certainties, triumphs and defeats, violent rage and consoling peace. In the psalms, the chosen people of God worshipped, praised, adored, lamented, invoked, interceded, pleaded, and gave thanks. Saint Athanasius (296–373), a bishop and doctor of the church, in speaking of the psalms, once remarked, “Nothing to be found in human life is omitted.”

In the fourth century, St. Ambrose of Milan said: “A psalm is a cry of happiness, the echo of gladness. It soothes the temper, lightens the burden of sorrow. It is a source of security by night, a lesson of wisdom by day. It is a shield when we are afraid, a celebration of holiness, a vision of serenity, a promise of peace and harmony. Day begins to the music of a psalm. Day closes to the echo of a psalm.”

In this book of 150 prayers, the last six psalms incorporate the same theme: praise. Amid all the

How do you pray with the psalms? What kinds of feelings—about God, about yourself—do the psalms call forth in you? Are you learning to delve into the variety of experiences of God found there?

emotions, feelings, and pleadings throughout the book of Psalms, the author's last words are a crescendo of praise that begins with Psalm 145:1: "I will extol you, my God and king; I will bless your name forever and ever."

The Hebrew title for the Book of Psalms is *tehillim*, the plural of *tehillah*, meaning "song of praise." The entire book is a collection of prayers in praise to God, but there is only one psalm that is specifically designated as a *tehillah*, a song of praise: Psalm 145. Many of the phrases of Psalm 145 occur in similar form in other psalms or throughout Scripture; they are gathered and repeated here in alternating calls to praise, followed by the grounds for praise.

Psalm 145 begins and ends with praise: from the first verses ("I will extol you, my God and king; I will bless your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless you; I will praise your name forever and ever") to the ending verse ("My mouth will speak the praises of the Lord; all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever"). The psalm is a vast outburst of praise. Sin, confession, petition, or thanksgiving are not found here; only praise.

Psalm 145 is one of the nine psalms in the Old Testament (9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145) that are acrostics. Each of the twenty-one lines of Psalm 145 begins with a subsequent letter of the Hebrew alphabet in its quest to praise God from A to Z (*aleph* to *taw* in Hebrew).

To begin each consecutive line of a psalm with the next letter of the alphabet is not just a literary method. Acrostics aid in ease of memoriza-

What recent events in your life have given you reason to focus on praising God?



tion; the method also reminds us that the message, the point, of the psalm is comprehensive. Psalm 145 calls us to praise God everywhere and for all things—from beginning to end.

The message of Psalm 145 is that God is king over all generations of the Israelites, over all peoples, over all living things. The psalm can be understood as a summary of God's thoughts, feelings, and actions toward all creatures. If we wonder "Who is God?" the answer can be found here.

The question for the psalmist is not, "Will you praise God?" or "How do you praise God?" It is presumed that all creatures will praise God. It is taken for granted that there is no choice but to be captivated by God; our passionate response will be praise. Thus, the deeper question for the psalmist is, "Who is this God, and what about this God compels our praise?" Psalm 145 has been described as a song in G major because it answers our question, "Who is God?" by exploring God's greatness, God's goodness, God's grace, and God's glory.

Psalm 145 has always had a key place in the life of the Jewish people. The Talmud, an ancient Jewish commentary on Scripture, recognizes its great importance: "Everyone who repeats the Tehillah of David thrice a day may be sure that he is a child of the world to come" (*Berakot*, 4b).



Who is God?



Psalm 145 appears in the Jewish prayer book more than any other psalm in the book of Psalms. The ancient Psalm Scroll discovered near the Dead Sea at Qumran and identified as 11QPsa contains a version of Psalm 145 in

which the refrain, “Blessed is the Lord and blessed is his name forever and ever,” is included after each verse, indicating that this psalm was used within community prayer, within liturgies.

For us today, this psalm is reassurance—and challenge. It’s a breathtaking psalm of hope: God holds us forever. When life is difficult, this psalm reminds us of our many blessings: God’s compassion, tenderness to us and the needy, goodness to all, and faithfulness. In the midst of unrest and uncertainty—in our lives and in the world around us—praising God is the answer. The challenge is putting our words of praise into action: being the hands of God in today’s world.

*This portion of Psalm 145 will be considered a few verses at a time, with the occasional question to guide your discussion or reflection.*

### *Understanding the Scene Itself*

<sup>13b</sup>**The LORD is trustworthy in all his words,  
and loving in all his works.**

<sup>14</sup>**The LORD supports all who are falling  
and raises up all who are bowed down.**

<sup>15</sup>The eyes of all look hopefully to you;  
you give them their food in due season.

<sup>16</sup>You open wide your hand  
and satisfy the desire of every living thing.

In roughly the first half of Psalm 145, the psalmist extols the power, goodness, and mercy of God (vv. 1-9). In this second half, we see the goodness and generosity of God primarily in terms of God's faithfulness to and for the people of God and all living things. The themes with which the psalm began are deepened: exalted divine mercy, tenderness, and fidelity that extend to the whole of humanity and all creatures. The psalmist concentrates on the love God reserves in a unique way for the poor and the weak.

We see a transition from God's power to God's nurture and care for those in need. The psalmist reminds us that not only is God powerful and transcendent (above and independent from all creation), but God is also strengthening and immanent (within and near creation).

The second part of verse 13 proclaims one of God's fundamental characteristics: faithfulness in all words and kindness in all works. The word "all" expresses the intensity and inclusivity of God's faithfulness and kindness. The subsequent verses continue this message and praise: God as the upholder, lifter, sustainer, and satisfier of every living thing.

Verse 14 paints an image of a proactive God who both supports the falling and raises those who have been bowed down (those suffering from injustice; those burdened by the duties and

What life experiences have helped you discover the transcendence of God? And the nearness of God? Do you tend to think of or experience God as predominantly transcendent or predominantly immanent?

trials of life, etc.). God rescues all people. These actions of God are expressed with active participles to emphasize the ongoing nature of God's care. God is the source and supporter of life. This enlarges our image of God; God doesn't just make life better; God is the foundation of our lives.



We are aware—over and over again—of God's care for humanity. Verses 15-16 proclaim that God's love is universal. God cares for all creatures: people, but also the multitudes that swarm the earth, in the air, in the waters, and the innumerable multitudes of living things too small even to be seen by our eyes.

These verses convey not just a cozy feeling but a dynamic action that satisfies the desires of every living thing. Similar longings and actions are also found in Psalm 104:27-28.

The animal kingdom may not have knowledge of God, but they seek their food according to the instinct that God has put into them (“and they sow not, neither do they reap,” Matt 6:26). God's care is not generic; it's “in due season,” the proper food that is suited to each animal, and to all the stages of life in each animal. For all creatures, including ourselves, there is great hope in these verses, hope for difficult times and places of life. The providence of God echoed in these lines has made them a popular prayer, especially at mealtimes.

In what ways might you help others discover God's care in the midst of daily living? How and when have you experienced God's care “in due season”—just when you needed it?

- <sup>17</sup>The LORD is just in all his ways,  
merciful in all his works.
- <sup>18</sup>The LORD is near to all who call upon him,  
to all who call upon him in truth.
- <sup>19</sup>He fulfills the desire of those who fear him;  
he hears their cry and saves them.
- <sup>20</sup>The LORD watches over all who love him,  
but all the wicked he destroys.

Reflecting on verse 17, Pope Benedict XVI, during his general audience on February 8, 2006, said: “Then, from the lips of the psalmist issues the profession of faith in the two divine qualities par excellence: justice and holiness. ‘You, Lord, are just in all your ways, faithful in all your works.’ In Hebrew, we come across two typical adjectives to illustrate the covenant that exists between God and the people: *saddiq* and *hasid*. They express justice, which wants to save and liberate from evil, and fidelity which is a sign of the loving greatness of the Lord.”

God’s justice and mercy are asserted. They are not in opposition, as we might think. God’s just standards are kind and merciful because they desire only all that is good.



Feeling hopeless and feeling distant from God are often connected. How does the language of Psalm 145 invite us to go beyond our feelings to a deeper truth about God's abiding presence?

How is God just? God violates no right; God wrongs no one; God demands of no one a service that would be unjust; all that God does is the best thing that could be done. Similar thoughts are seen in Psalms 89:14 and 97:2.

The word rendered “merciful” here is usually used for loving-kindness, concern for God’s favored ones. It is used of God only here and in Jeremiah 3:12; it’s an active term for the One who exercises loving-kindness. In God we find both justice and mercy; they meet together, and act harmoniously in God’s plan.

At times, especially when things seem hopeless, we might feel far from God. Verse 18 gives us a promise: God is intimately near, always saving, helping, and delivering us from trouble. Verses 18-19 are worth memorizing and claiming often.

In reality, God is near to everyone, for God is present everywhere, but here the psalmist specifies a unique time when God seems to be near: in prayer, in praise, in calling upon God. In verse 18b, the psalmist changes from the inclusive nature of the psalm to more specificity. Anyone can call upon God, as long as it is done “in truth”—in reverence, fidelity, and sincerity.

In verses 19-20, God fulfills desires, hears the cries of the people, saves and protects; only the wicked are in trouble (see, too, Psalms 31:20, 23; 97:10; and 121:3-8). God is not Santa Claus, bringing wealth and prosperity, making life easy and comfortable. God fulfills the desire “of those who fear him.” As we grow in respect, honor, and “fear” of the Lord, our desires match God’s

desires. Psalm 37:4 reminds us, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

**<sup>21</sup>My mouth will speak the praises of the LORD;  
all flesh will bless his holy name forever and  
ever.**

In February 2006, Pope Benedict commented on this last line:

The psalmist’s last word, then, is the same as that with which he began the hymn: It is an invitation to praise and bless the Lord and his “name,” namely, the living and holy person that acts and saves in the world and history. Beyond that, it is a call to all creatures, who have received the gift of life, to associate themselves to the prayer of praise: “All flesh will bless your holy name forever.” It is a kind of everlasting hymn that must be raised from earth to heaven; it is the communal celebration of the universal love of God, source of peace, joy and salvation.

This call (of v. 21) is fulfilled in the book of Revelation (4:8-9).

### *Praying the Word / Sacred Reading*

*Hope is far from wishful thinking. Instead, it is built on an awareness of God’s action in the world. With this in mind, take a few moments of silence and then read aloud Psalm 145:13b-21. What phrases are particularly meaningful*

**What role does praising God play in your ability to be hope-filled? Think of a recent time in which you praised God; what triggered that prayer of praise for you?**

*for you? What words fill you with a deepening desire to hope in God?*

*If you were to write your own psalm of praise, how would you complete the following, using your own observations and experiences of God?*

The Lord is trustworthy in all times.  
The eyes of all look hopefully to you because . . .

### *Living the Word*

- *Share with a close friend or family member some of the things that tend to leave you feeling a bit hopeless. Also share those things that build up your ability to hope in God.*
- *Commit together over a period of time to making lists of things that lead you to praise God. This list could include observed events, personal experiences, relationships, and so on. Share your lists together and discuss whether being conscious of God's goodness increases your hope.*