Epigraph

Sing praises to the Lord, O you his saints,
and give thanks to his holy name.
For his anger is but for a moment,
but his favor is for a lifetime.
Weeping may tarry for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

PSALM 30:4–5

Truly I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power.

JESUS (MARK 9:1)

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

. . . . . .

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T. S. ELIOT

10. End

The end of prayer is praise. The Psalms show praise as the end of prayer in both meanings of the word: the terminus, the last word in the final Psalm 150; and the goal at which all the psalm-prayers arrive after their long travels through the unmapped back countries of pain, doubt, and trouble, with only occasional vistas of the sunlit lands, along the way.

This last word is also, most significantly, the first word. The verb "praise" *(halel)* in its noun form *(tehillim)* furnishes the title to our prayer book. "Book of Praises" *sepher tehillim)* is the Hebrew title to the 150 prayers that we commonly name "The Psalms." "Psalms," the title given in our English translations, is from the Greek, *psalmoi*, "songs" used in the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament begun in the third century B.C.).

This title, "Praises," catches our attention because it is inaccurate. Most psalms are complaints. They are calls of help by helpless and hurting men and women. They are wrung out of desperate conditions. The definitive Psalms' scholar, Hermann Gunkel, said that the prayer of complaint was the backbone of the Psalter.[1] How can it be appropriate, then, to name these prayers "Praises"? Is this false advertising, an attractive smile pasted on the cover of a book that contains a lot of pain, doubt, and trouble? Does the title, in order to involve us in what otherwise might repel, misrepresent the basic nature of prayer as something more pleasant than the data of daily experience warrants, a "spoonful of sugar to make the medicine go down"? A life of prayer forces us to deal with the reality of the world and of our own lives at a depth and with an honesty that is quite unheard of by the prayerless, and much of that reality we would certainly avoid if we could. Do we really want to feel this deeply? Do we want to think this far? The Psalms take us to the painful heart of rejections and alienations and guilts that we could live on the surface of much more happily. If we knew that was where prayer takes us would we have ever signed on? Is the title a pious deceit?

"'Praises" as a title is not statistically accurate but it is accurate all the same. It is accurate because it accurately describes the end, the finished product. All prayer, pursued far enough, becomes praise. Any prayer, no matter how desperate its origin, no matter how angry and fearful the experiences it traverses, ends up in praise. It does not always get there quickly or easily—the trip can take a lifetime—but the end is always praise. "Praises," in fact, is the only accurate title for our prayer book, for it is the goal that shapes the journey: "The end is where we start from."

The end has far greater shaping over our lives than the beginning. That which we are made for is more significant in our development than the biology of our making. In Aristotle's philosophical analysis of causes, it is not the first cause (the kick that gets us going) but the final cause (the lure that pulls us to the finish) that is uniquely and ultimately decisive.[2] We are not intricately engineered genetic chips that when programmed correctly make the economy prosper; we are unfinished creatures, ravenously purpose-hungry, alive with possibilities. For humans the future is the most creative and the most essential aspect of time. Human life is that "paradoxical reality which consists in deciding what we are going to do, therefore in being what we not yet are, in starting to be the future."[3] The Bible spends only a few pages establishing the conditions of our beginnings; and then several hundred pages cultivating in us a taste for the future—immersing us in a nar-

rative in which the future is always impinging on the present, so that we live out of our beginnings and by the means that are in accordance with the reality of our ends. Not only as a child and adolescent but also as an adult, "what I want to be when I grow up" has far more influence on what I say and do and become than the genetic code I received at my conception.

Prayer is our most intense and interior act of futurity. All prayers, by definition, are directed to God, and this aim brings them, finally into the presence of God where "everything that has breath" praises the Lord. Praise is the deep, even if often hidden, eschatological dimension in prayer.[4]

Praise Eruptions

There are intimations of this throughout the Psalms. Not infrequently, in the middle of a terrible lament, defying logic and without transition, praise erupts.

Psalm 13, for instance. Five hard questions are put to God, followed by three petitions underscored by a triple desperation. The prayer is pure lament. There is no evidence in the prayer that even one of the questions is answered; there is no sign that even a first installment is made on granting the petitions; there is no hint that the desperate conditions change into anything less desperate. But abruptly and unaccountably the laments metamorphose into praise:

But I have trusted in thy steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

The first and last verbs ("trusted" and "dealt bountifully") are rendered as completed actions, but no experience is set forth to validate them: the experience of the prayer is doubt (expressed in those five questions) and deprivation (expressed in those three petitions). All the same, the two actions are said to have occurred: God "dealt bountifully" and the person "trusted." Where? How? Why? We don't know. Nothing "happened." Yet somehow, in a way never explained but often verified, in the act of praying the worst of things, praise springs forth, fully formed and resplendently armed, like Athena from the head of Zeus: "my heart shall rejoice"; "I will sing." The prayer, for a moment, is in touch with its final end, its completion in praise. "Most joy is anticipatory," says Karl Barth. "It normally has something of an eschatological character."[5]

This kind of thing happens all the time as people pray. Praise, when we least expect, in places we never would have guessed, erupts.[6] There is nothing in psychology or grammar to account of this. "Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings; it is the Lord who rises with healing in his wings," as William Cowper puts it. Not surprisingly, this happens a lot in the Psalms. St. Teresa of Avila, who lived a hard life with much sickness, badgered by detractors and misunderstood by friends, confirms the cheerful witness, "The pay begins in this life."[7]

Praising through the Alphabet

This *telos* of praise, embedded in the very nature of prayer, begins to be formalized at Psalm 145. Psalm 145 is given the title Praise *(t'hillah)*, the only prayer in the Psalter so designated. This is the first element in an elaborate and artful finale that brings the Psalms to a conclusion.

Psalm 145 is an anthology, arranged in the form of an acrostic. The twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet form, in turn, the initial letters of quotations and near quotations, imitations and echoes from the previous 144 psalms.[8] The striking feature of this acrostic anthology is not its form (acrostics are not new in the Psalter) but its vigorously single-minded selectivity: each of the entries is a sentence of praise.

No lament or complaint is permitted. No confession or perplexity is admitted. It is all praise.

This is remarkable because an acrostic suggests, if not exactly promises, inclusive completeness—everything from A to Z. The Psalms have explored the totality of the human condition before God—the Sheol-depths and the Sirion-heights, the quiet green pastures and the harsh jackel-haunted wastes. In an anthology set as a conclusion we would expect a compendium—a selection of lines that hold before us the enormous range of prayer, the incredibly diverse country that has been climbed and tunneled and trekked. Isn't it important, in conclusion, that we do not lose access to any of this experience, not lose touch with a single syllable in this encyclopedic articulation of our humanity in all its complexity? Instead we get praise, all praise. Like Wallace Stevens's poem in which a blackbird is looked at over and over again, from angle after angle eighteen times, Psalm 145 takes a single subject and says it, with variations, until the alphabet runs out.

The foundations for the conclusion have now been laid: we realize the end of prayer implicit in every beginning prayer, that eucharist is subterranean and will eventually break out no matter what the surface terrain and weather show at the present.

The Final Exuberance

This meticulous acrostic, though, hardly prepares us for what follows: five hallelujah psalms, each more exuberant than the last. This final exuberance is not arbitrarily imposed on the collected psalms to give a suitable and pleasing finish; it is organic to prayer and issues out of its very nature.

Earlier hallelujah psalms (111, 112, 113) were taken up into the celebration of Passover, the great salvation feast that gave focus to all of Israel's prayers in celebrative worship. For Christians this feast takes shape in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, called eucharist (Greek for "thanksgiving") after its characteristic prayer of thanksgiving, combining praise and blessing.

Eucharist, then, is the Christian term that gathers up the hallelujahs of Israel that issue out of creation and salvation and follows them to their end, their *telos*, in Christ. Eucharist describes the end, the goal and conclusion of prayer. The eucharistic impulse is internal to prayer, and eventually shows itself.[9]

Prefigurings of this end occur spontaneously as we have noted throughout the psalms (these outbreaks always occur when people pray), but they have also been inserted formally at intervals so that a cumulative expectation of final praise is built into the very structure of the Psalter. At the end of each of the editorially arranged five "books" (1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, 107–150), there is a praising benediction.

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting!
Amen and Amen. (41:13)

Blessed be his glorious name for ever;
may his glory fill the whole earth!
Amen and Amen! (72:19)

Blessed be the Lord forever!
Amen and Amen! (89:52)

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting!
And let all the people say, "Amen!"
Praise the Lord! (106:48)

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord! (150:6)

The first four benedictions work variations on a common theme with the words "Blessing" and "Amen" holding key positions. Blessing is the initial word establishing, in first place, the promise and expectation of the rich goodness of God spilling

over into creation and creatures. A double Amen, nailing down the affirmation of God, his most certain Yes, is the last word. Three times this double Amen is used in identical repetitions (41:13; 72:19; 89:52); the fourth time (106:48) the ante is raised to "Let all the people say, 'Amen!'" The "sense of an ending" is gathering momentum. Then, almost as an afterthought it seems, a Hallelujah ("praise the Lord!") is added. When the time comes to provide a conclusion for the fifth book, the Blessing and the Amen, wonderful and powerful as they are, are dropped in order to bring the Hallelujah front and center as the controlling word. Psalm 150 begins and ends with Hallelujah, but also uses it internally. These hallelujahs are cannonades: thirteen times this strongest of all Hebrew praise words thunders across the earth reverberating the eucharistic end of prayer.

There is more. Psalm 150 does not stand alone; four more hallelujah psalms are inserted in front of it so that it becomes the fifth of five psalms that conclude the Psalter—five hallelujah psalms, one for each "book" of the Psalms, and the last, the 150th doing double duty as the conclusion to both the fifth book and to the five books all together.

These five hallelujah psalms are extraordinarily robust. They put all the acts of God's salvation and deliverance, his creation and providence on display and festoon them with hallelujah garlands. They put the sounds of the hallelujah into wind and water, widow and orphan, ravens and angels, lute and harp, sea monsters and saints. The five hallelujah psalms with Psalm 145 as a foundation are a cathedral built entirely of praise. No matter how much we suffer, no matter our doubts, no matter how angry we get, no matter how many times we have asked in desperation or doubt, "How long?", prayer develops finally into praise. Everything finds its way to the doorstep of praise. Praise is the consummating prayer. This is not to say that other prayers are inferior to praise, only that all prayer pursued far enough, becomes praise.

This architectonic form, besides assuring completeness also suggests that there are no shortcuts. The thoughtful and pains-taking process of selecting, arranging, and concluding is the exact antithesis of glibness. This is not a "word of praise" slapped onto whatever mess we are in at the moment. This crafted conclusion for the Psalms tells us that our prayers are going to end in praise, but that it is also going to take awhile. Don't rush it. It may take years, decades even, before certain prayers arrive at the hallelujahs, at Psalms 146–150 with their acrostic foundation in Psalm 145. Not every prayer is capped off with praise. In fact most prayers, if the Psalter is a true guide, are not. But prayer, a praying life, finally becomes praise. Prayer is always reaching towards praise and will finally arrive there. If we persist in prayer, laugh and cry, doubt and believe, struggle and dance and then struggle again, we will surely end up at Psalm 150, on our feet, applauding, "Encore! Encore!"[10]

Like the notes of music that anticipate melodic completion by notes yet to come, prayer has this element of futurity always in it, pulling us to the region of completion, the region of glory and praise.[11] The future is not a blank to be filled in, depending on our mood, by either fantasy or horror, but a source of brightness that we await and receive. Our lives are still outstanding. Our prayers give expression to lives that go far beyond the past and present and reach into what is promised and prophesied. When we pray we can no longer confine our understanding of ourselves to who we are or have been; we understand ourselves in terms of possibilities yet to be realized —in St. Paul's phrase, "the glory yet to be revealed."

And so the Psalms come to an end, a resounding conclusion with all the prayer experiences of men and women who risk their lives in the venture of faith, gathered into praise. The end of prayer, all prayer, any prayer, is praise. Our lives fill out in goodness; earth and heaven meet in an extraordinary conjunc-

tion. Clashing cymbals announce the glory: Blessing. Amen.
Hallelujah.