

Still,
**I Will
Praise**

The Power of Praising God

...Even When You Don't Feel Like It

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...Even When You Don't Feel Like It

Renée Bondi
with Nancy Curtis

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Dedication

To Mom, whose spiritual discipline
inspires me to this day.

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Let's Get Started

MUCH has been written and many sermons have been preached about praising God, but how many of us really devote ourselves to lavishing praise and adoration on our Savior? Sure, we praise God when we get a new job, we shout “Praise the Lord!” when we win a victory over something that’s been troubling us, and maybe we even dare to raise our hands during worship at church, but how many of us consider praising God when we get turned down for that job, when we feel abandoned and forgotten, and when we suffer defeat?

I now have a deep understanding about praising our Lord. Ironically, I didn’t learn it from standing high on a mountaintop but from sitting in my wheelchair in the valley. Praising God on a daily basis wasn’t something that came naturally to me but a discipline that had to be learned and practiced.

I cannot raise my hands high in praise, but I can raise my voice and my heart. I now know firsthand

that we need to praise when the road is rocky as well as straight, when experiencing showers of blessing or storms of confusion, in periods of health and of sickness. Our situation does not alter our need to praise God; as a matter of fact, I've come to realize that one of the most important times to praise God is when we struggle. But I could never have told you that twenty-five years ago when I broke my neck.

For those of you who are not familiar with how I landed in this wheelchair, let me quickly explain. It was the middle of May 1988, and at dinner my fiancé Mike gave me my engagement ring before we were off to chaperone the high school prom at San Clemente High School where I was the choral music director. The next day I had a full day directing the music for our annual spring musical, and that night I went to bed as usual, admiring my engagement ring one last time before I turned out the light. I drifted off to sleep, and the next thing I knew I was in midair, diving off the foot of my bed. I landed on the top of my head, finishing the flip with my feet in the closet and my head against the dust ruffle. Stunned and in excruciating pain, I wondered, *What in the world just happened?* Hours later in the hospital, the doctors gave my family and me the devastating diagnosis; I had broken my neck between the fourth and fifth vertebrae and was paralyzed from my upper chest down. I was quadriplegic and would spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair. To this day, we don't have a good grasp on what happened that night. I don't

have any history of sleepwalking or any kind of disease that would cause a seizure. The only thing we can think of is that I had a dream, possibly where I was diving into a pool, but I don't remember any such dream. I'm looking forward to getting the answer when I get to heaven!

During the last two decades, I've learned many life lessons. I've been in the valley of darkness and I've been on the mountaintop. One of the most valuable lessons I've learned is how important, even foundational, it is for believers to praise our Lord at all times.

But what if something goes wrong? Radically wrong! What if I get a scary diagnosis from the doctor or lose my job or have a damaging argument with a loved one—surely I don't thank and praise God then! Well, yes, I should. In First Thessalonians 5:18, Paul says, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." Notice the verse doesn't say *for* all circumstances but *in* all circumstances. You might not thank God that your boss is difficult to please, but you can thank Him that you have a job and an income. You wouldn't thank God that you had a car accident, but you could thank Him that no one was seriously injured. You probably wouldn't thank God that your washing machine broke and spilled water all over the floor, but you could thank Him that you owned a washing machine when many in third-world countries don't have that luxury. Even in challenging circumstances, you can find some reason to thank God if you look for it.

I'm sure you will agree that in difficult seasons we don't feel like praising God. We'd rather wallow in our misery. We feel more comfortable griping, complaining, fault-finding and being crabby and irritable. Let's face it: in unpleasant situations, praising God is not our natural instinct. That's what the writer of Hebrews calls a "sacrifice of praise" (13:15). A sacrifice of praise means that we offer honor and praise to God whether our circumstances are good or bad, whether we feel like it or not. It's a discipline.

So if it's unnatural, if it's a discipline, then why do it? Because our praise brings us to the heart of God. Psalm 22:3 says that God inhabits the praises of His people; in other words, when we praise, God shows up! Praise and worship put God where He belongs (on the throne) and us where we belong (in submission). I've come to understand that when we take our focus off our own concerns and annoyances and place it on what a great God we serve, the weight of our problems lightens and our faith begins to soar.

Simply put, when I praise God and thank Him, it reminds me that God is God, and I am not. It puts the world back into perspective and I get my spiritual equilibrium back.

Remember, though, that praising God and thanking God are closely related, but different. Praise is worshipping and honoring God for who He is—the Creator, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the Good Shepherd, the Everlasting Father,

Messiah, the Prince of Peace, the great I Am. Acknowledging His greatness—that's praise. But then we *thank* God for what He has done for us. We thank Him for our family, health, job, home and friends, for that unexpected phone call that brightened our day, for the beautiful sunset, for timing that kept us from being in an accident, for the fun day we had at the park, etc. So praising and thanking God are different but are equally important. I confess that I've been rather loose with the terms in this book and have used them interchangeably, but the central point to remember is that God deserves to be worshiped both for who He is and for what He has done!

So this is what this book is about—praising God when we feel like it and praising God when we don't. It may or may not change your circumstances, but I promise that it will change your focus, which will change your mind and then your heart and, as a result, your entire attitude.

I pray that in these pages you'll find inspiration to love the Lord more fully and to praise and thank Him more often. May God touch your heart and bless you with His presence as you read *Still, I Will Praise*.

*I have suffered very much;
preserve my life, O LORD, according to your word.
Accept, O LORD, the willing praise of my mouth,
and teach me your laws.*

Psalm 119:107–8

Choosing to Praise God

IN TIMES OF FRUSTRATION

PURE frustration was the catalyst that started my journey toward learning to praise God in all situations. I was facing having to train not one but two new attendants. Being in a wheelchair and not having the use of my arms or legs, I am dependent on caregivers for the daily routine of things other people can do for and by themselves, like going to the bathroom, bathing, brushing my teeth, blow-drying my hair and dressing, to name just a few. I have an attendant in my home three hours every morning just to help me get ready for the day. Unfortunately, even if caregivers are experienced in assisting others, they still have to be trained to my particular needs. They need to know where things are stored in our home, how to adjust me comfortably in my wheelchair and how to keep my hair from looking frizzy.

Let's face it. Even though they're wonderful people, I really don't want to have attendants in the first place. I want to be able to take my own bath by myself, style my own hair, drive my own van and blow my own nose just like any other woman, so I have to deliberately use self-control in not taking my resentment out on those who are there to help me! On good days there's no problem. On bad days I have to watch myself. Trust me—it's not a good thing when the person you've just snapped at is brushing your hair!

Having to train new caregivers is always a strain, but this one time I was particularly overwhelmed. I had just completed a very taxing year (the one year I'd returned to teaching) when the economy took a downturn and two of my caregivers had to resign to pursue full-time positions. As a teacher, I had to explain and exercise patience with my students, but by the time school was out, I was tired of explaining and had exhausted my supply of patience. Just when I needed to be free of those disciplines, I was looking at weeks of practicing both. It was almost more than I could handle. My patience and tactfulness were at an all-time low. I didn't think I could nicely explain one more time how to put my pants on or how to get my hand in the wrist brace I use to eat and type. But like it or not, I had to push through and do it. It was not optional. I had to have new caregivers, and no one could train them for me.

About that time I began observing how other Christians I knew seemed to be so joyful when I knew they

were carrying heavy loads. They seemed to have a peace and a joy that superseded their problems. I wondered how they could smile so warmly, be interested in others and have a positive attitude when their hearts were broken. They managed to praise God no matter what! I knew I wasn't there, and I wanted to be.

So I went to my Bible concordance and looked up every time the word "praise" was used. There were a gazillion entries. Being the person I am, I wanted to read them all. Hours and hours later, I figured out that I simply couldn't read every verse in one sitting. I decided to narrow my field a bit, so I looked up the times "praise" was used when people in the Bible were facing daunting tasks. I wanted to see how biblical characters praised the Lord when they were confronted with mountains.

I found myself totally enamored with the story of King David and his preparation for the building of the temple in First Chronicles 22 and 23. David wanted to be the one to build the temple to honor God and house the Ark of the Covenant. However, God told David that he had shed too much blood and had made too many wars, so God passed the responsibility (and the honor) of building the temple to David's son Solomon and ensured a time of peace during his reign so this great task could be accomplished.

When we pick up the story, David is preparing to abdicate the throne to pass the kingship on to his son Solomon. David wants to make sure that the temple

is “exceedingly magnificent, famous and glorious.” Because Solomon is too young and inexperienced for such an undertaking, David is arranging for the building of the temple before his death. He tells Solomon that he has prepared one hundred thousand talents of gold and one million talents of silver along with bronze and iron beyond measure. He had prepared timber and stone and workmen in abundance—woodsmen and stonecutters and all types of skillful men for every task.

Now here’s the part that caught my attention. When David passed the kingship onto Solomon, he gathered together all the leaders of Israel. Now follow these numbers closely. There were thirty-eight thousand Levites, and David divided them into four areas of responsibility: twenty-four thousand were to look after the work of the house of the Lord, six thousand were officers and judges, four thousand were gatekeepers and four thousand were to praise God with the musical instruments that King David himself had made. Did you catch that? David assembled *four thousand* men to do nothing but praise the Lord. And he even made musical instruments for that very purpose. I’m trying to picture even one person walking around a construction site these days with the assignment to do nothing but praise the Lord!

Fascinated, I kept reading. In Second Chronicles 5 I picked up the end of the story concerning the dedication of the completed temple. What a spectacle it must have been! When they brought in the Ark of the Covenant—the symbol of God’s presence with them, which

held the original tables on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed—to place it in the Holy of Holies, the Levites stood at the east end of the altar dressed in white linen. They had cymbals, stringed instruments and harps, and with them were one hundred and twenty men with trumpets. Together the singers lifted their voices as the instruments rang out, and they praised the Lord singing,

He is good;
his love endures forever. (5:13)

Now that was a symphony of praise! And at that moment the temple was filled with a cloud of the glory of God so big that the priests could not continue ministering because of it!

Picture this in your mind! All those men robed in white, all kinds of musical instruments and a heavenly choir all there for one purpose—to praise God! My guess is that their worship was so loud it could be heard all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. Awesome!

Then Solomon spoke to the people and recounted how his father David had had it in his heart to build the temple but how God assigned it to the next generation. Then Solomon, the king of Israel, bowed down before the huge assembly, lifted his hands toward heaven and prayed, “O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven or on earth—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way” (6:14).

Think about it. Solomon was king, and kings don't bow—not to anybody! People bow to the king, not the other way around. It's a pride thing; it's a statement of position, authority and superiority. But Solomon kneeled in front of the entire country, demonstrating his submission, love and devotion to the almighty God who is the ultimate king and authority.

Solomon went on to praise God by marveling that He actually could and would live on earth and dwell in the temple made with hands. God choosing to dwell among sinful people in this way foreshadowed the time when He would walk the earth in the form of Jesus Christ—our Messiah who lived among sinful people and died to redeem us and carry us back to heaven. What an amazing God we serve!

By the time I finished reading about David, Solomon and the temple, I was convicted. It was obvious to me that praise had a huge role in the building of the temple and in God's response of dwelling there. *Well, I thought to myself, if King David, a man after God's own heart, and his son Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, thought it was that important to praise God during the building and dedication of the temple, then evidently praise is something I need to be practicing more in my life.*

But then there was that caregiver thing I was facing. One night I lay in bed and prayed, *Lord, I've always wanted to be a person who praises You even when things are painful. I'm sorry I have not done this in the past, but*

I want to begin today. So out of obedience, I'm going to start praising You every time these new gals walk through the door.

And so it began. When one of my new attendants appeared, I prayed inside, *I praise You, Lord. I lift Your name on high. You are amazing. You are powerful. You are holy. You are everything, and I praise You! I praise You!* And I continued praising the Lord as I instructed my new caregivers. When they were bathing me, I glorified the Lord. When I was telling them how to comb my hair, I was praising God. When I instructed them on how to lock down my chair in the latches in the van, I worshiped Jesus. When I wanted to snap at them for doing something wrong or for not knowing how to perform a task, I glorified God instead. I didn't feel like it; it was my sacrifice of praise.

One day I was sharing my struggle with my friend Joni Eareckson Tada (speaker, singer, author and the founder of Joni and Friends International Disability Center). Being quadriplegic for over forty years, she understood my struggle of training new caregivers, and she told me one of her strategies. When the caregiver comes through the door, she says, *Lord, I don't have a smile for this woman who's coming in right now. But You do. I add to that—so please smile through me.*

After a few weeks of my intentional praising, my husband Mike commented, "Boy, Renée, you sure sailed through training your attendants this time! I didn't hear you complain at all!"

“Really? You’ve got to be kidding me!” It hadn’t occurred to me until he said it, but he was right. Training my caregivers was not the odious task that I had imagined it would be. The reason was obvious: I praised God and thanked Him instead of wallowing in self-pity and resentment.

And so began my journey of learning how to praise. I learned right away that it was a choice to praise or to be impatient, to worship or to wage war, to let God respond in me or to respond in my own frustration. I was beginning to learn that honoring and worshiping God, even in the dark times, is key to living the abundant life Jesus promised.