

# Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 113

---

## Content & Intent

### This Text — Content

Psalm 113 opens the Egyptian Hallel (Psalms 113–118), a collection sung at Passover and major Jewish festivals. The psalm moves in three distinct acts. The first act (vv. 1–3) is a summons to praise — the servants of the LORD are called to bless His name from the rising to the setting of the sun, across all time and all geography. The second act (vv. 4–6) grounds that summons in the LORD’s incomparable transcendence — He is exalted above all nations, His glory above the heavens; He stoops to observe even the heavens and the earth below Him. The third act (vv. 7–9) is the theological reversal that gives the summons its gospel heartbeat — this transcendent God lifts the poor from the dust, raises the needy from the ash heap, and seats them with princes; He transforms the barren woman into a joyful mother of children. The movement is deliberate: summons → theology of who God is → demonstration of what God does with what He is.

### This Text — Intent

God is not merely informing Israel (and through Israel, the church) of His transcendence and His compassion. He is calling His people to an active, vocal, sustained, and geographically unbounded life of praise — because once the worshiper truly sees who this God is and what He does, silence is impossible and praise is inevitable. The intent is doxological combustion: the passage is designed to produce worship that cannot be contained, not as emotional response manufactured by rhetoric, but as the rational, affectional, and volitional response of a people who have seen God stoop to the ash heap and lift them from it.

---

**Subject Sentence:** The incomparably exalted LORD stoops to lift the lowly — and this demands unceasing, universal praise.

---

**Primary Claim:** God is summoning His people to lives of sustained, explicit praise by confronting them with the uncontainable wonder that the Most High God personally, persistently lifts the most broken and forgotten from the ash heap — and this God has done it for *them*.

---

## Interpretive Evaluation

### **The Summons in Verses 1–3 — Who Are “Servants of the LORD”?**

Some readings flatten “servants of the LORD” into a general reference to all humanity or to Israel as a collective national identity. This is insufficient. In the Psalter, “servants of the LORD” (‘*avdê YHWH*) carries covenantal weight — it refers to those who stand in a defined relationship of belonging to YHWH, who have been claimed by Him and who render Him worship and obedience as their Lord. This reading is confirmed by the Hallel context: the psalm was sung by those who had been redeemed from Egypt, those who knew themselves to be the LORD’s servants because He had made them so. The New Testament continuation of this category is the church, those redeemed by the greater Exodus of Christ. The summons is not to generic human praise but to covenantal praise — praise that flows from knowing yourself to be His.

### **The Theology of Divine Condescension in Verses 4–6 — Transcendence Without Distance**

A common pietistic reading treats verses 4–6 as a flattering description of God’s greatness designed to make the worshiper feel small and appropriately humble. This misses the structural logic. The psalmist establishes God’s transcendence not to produce prostration alone, but to heighten the wonder of what follows. The exaltation (v. 4) and the stooping (vv. 6–9) are placed in deliberate juxtaposition — it is *because* He is so high that the stooping is so staggering. The Lutheran tradition occasionally reads this transcendence-condescension movement through the lens of the theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*), which, while not the psalm’s primary frame, does capture the directional logic: the higher the throne, the more staggering the descent. This is a contribution worth retaining in preaching even if the Lutheran systematic frame is not adopted wholesale.

### **The Reversal in Verses 7–9 — Literal Social Program or Theological Pattern?**

Some liberation theology readings (and certain progressive evangelical applications) read verses 7–9 as a mandate for social justice activism — God’s lifting of the poor from the dust is the paradigm for what His people must do in the world. While the Reformed tradition does not resist social concern, this reading risks collapsing the passage’s primary movement: the psalm is describing what *God* does, not primarily prescribing what His people must do. The subject of the reversals is YHWH. The psalm’s intent is to generate worship, not to generate a social program. The Reformed reading acknowledges that these reversals have implications for how God’s people view and treat the lowly (God-imitation ethics are real), but insists that the passage’s primary claim is doxological and theological, not ethical-activist. The ethical dimension is downstream from the worship claim, not its replacement.

### **The Barren Woman (v. 9) — Generic or Resonant?**

Some readings treat the barren woman as a generic illustration of God's reversal power, with no particular typological freight. This undersells the canonical weight of the image. In the Old Testament, the barren woman made fruitful is a recurring pattern of divine intervention: Sarah (Genesis 17–21), Rebekah (Genesis 25), Rachel (Genesis 30), Hannah (1 Samuel 1–2) — and Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2 is almost certainly the direct literary ancestor of this psalm's reversal language. The New Testament continues the pattern through Elizabeth (Luke 1). The barren woman is not generic — she is the canonical emblem of the humanly impossible being made possible by divine initiative. To preach her as merely illustrative is to lose the canonical resonance that the original audience would have immediately felt.

---

## Key Canonical Support

- **1 Samuel 2:1–10 (Hannah's Prayer)** — The closest Old Testament parallel to Psalm 113's reversal language; Hannah's exaltation of the God who raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap is the literary forerunner of this psalm, and both texts share the barren woman made fruitful as the paradigm of divine reversal. Hannah's prayer also grounds the language eschatologically — "He will give strength to His king" (v. 10) — pointing forward to the Messiah.
- **Luke 1:46–55 (The Magnificat)** — Mary's song of praise draws directly on Hannah's prayer and on Psalm 113's reversal pattern; she is herself the barren-equivalent (the virgin, the lowly handmaid) whom God has exalted, and the child she carries is the ultimate divine descent into the dust of human flesh. The Magnificat is the New Testament fulfillment of Psalm 113's doxological claim.
- **Philippians 2:5–11** — Paul's Christ-hymn is the most explicit New Testament statement of the transcendence-condescension pattern the psalm establishes: the One who was in the form of God emptied Himself, took the form of a servant, descended to the dust of death — and was therefore highly exalted. The psalm's structure (exaltation → stooping) is christologically realized in the Incarnation and Resurrection.
- **Isaiah 57:15** — "For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit.'" This is the Old Testament's most direct prophetic parallel to Psalm 113's theology of divine condescension — God's transcendence and His nearness to the lowly are held together as complementary, not competing, truths.
- **Malachi 1:11** — "From the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations" — the universal, geographic scope of praise summoned in Psalm 113:3 finds its prophetic fulfillment in Malachi's vision of worldwide worship, pointing forward to the global reach of the gospel and the ingathering of the nations.

---

**Aim:** To move the reader from knowing *about* God’s greatness and compassion to the active, sustained, vocal, and wonder-fueled worship that the psalm itself demands — by grounding that worship in the specific claim that this high and exalted God has personally stooped to lift *them* from the ash heap.

---

## Content Table

| Verse(s) | Content                                                                             | Notes                                                                                                                  |
|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1        | “Praise the LORD! Praise, O servants of the LORD, praise the name of the LORD!”     | Triple summons; covenantal address to those who belong to YHWH; <i>Hallelu-Yah</i> opens the psalm                     |
| 2        | “Blessed be the name of the LORD from this time forth and forevermore!”             | Temporal scope of praise: from now through eternity                                                                    |
| 3        | “From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the LORD is to be praised!” | Geographic scope: the entire inhabited earth; universal praise is the fitting response to a universal Lord             |
| 4        | “The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens.”              | Transcendence established: above nations (horizontally) and above heavens (vertically); no category contains Him       |
| 5        | “Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high,”                              | Rhetorical question expecting no answer; incomparability formula; “our God” — covenantal intimacy within transcendence |
| 6        | “who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?”                                  | The stoop begins: even to look at the heavens, He must look <i>down</i> ; the reversal of expectation is deliberate    |
| 7        | “He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap,”           | Direct echo of Hannah’s prayer (1 Sam. 2:8); the poor and needy are the canonical emblems of those with no             |

| Verse(s) | Content                                                                                        | Notes                                                                                                                                                                            |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 8        | “to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people.”                               | human resources<br>Reversal completed: from lowest social position to highest; the grammar is active — God does the raising and the seating                                      |
| 9        | “He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyful mother of children. Praise the LORD!” | Canonical emblem of humanly impossible reversal; returns to <i>Hallelu-Yah</i> — the doxological frame closes; praise is the only fitting response to what has just been claimed |

## Divisions Table

| Division | Verses | Label                                                                                      |
|----------|--------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1        | 1–3    | The Summons: Praise Without Limit — Covenantal People Called to Universal, Eternal Worship |
| 2        | 4–6    | The Foundation: The Incomparable LORD — Transcendent Above All, Yet Stooping to See        |
| 3        | 7–9    | The Gospel: The High God and the Low People — Reversal as the Ground of All Praise         |

## Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

**Subject Sentence:** The incomparably exalted LORD stoops to lift the lowly — and this demands unceasing, universal praise.

**Primary Claim:** God is summoning His people to lives of sustained, explicit praise by confronting them with the uncontainable wonder that the Most High God personally, persistently lifts the most broken and forgotten from the ash heap — and this God has done it for *them*.

## Applications (Five)

**1. [Mind/Belief] — Reframe your functional theology of God's attention.** Most people live with an operational assumption that God is generally present but specifically attentive to large, important, consequential matters — and that their particular smallness, failure, or brokenness registers as background noise. Psalm 113 destroys this assumption at the structural level. The God who is so exalted that even the heavens are beneath Him is the same God who not only notices the ash heap but goes to it and physically lifts its occupants out. The psalm is not saying God *can* do this — it is saying this is what He *does*. Repent of the functional deism that tells you your particular brokenness is too small or too shameful to be the object of divine attention, and receive the text's claim: He stoops. To you. From there.

**2. [Affections/Worship] — Let the strangeness of divine condescension rekindle genuine wonder.** Familiarity is the enemy of doxology. The claim that the Most High God stoops to the ash heap should be staggering — it is structurally as strange as a king leaving his throne to carry a beggar into the throne room and seat him among the nobility. But for those who have heard this truth often, it has become wallpaper. Psalm 113 is not written to communicate information — it is written to produce the triple *Hallelu-Yah* with which it opens and closes. Sit with the juxtaposition of verses 4–6 and verses 7–9 until the strangeness returns. The God above all heavens goes to the ash heap. Let that actually land. The psalm demands praise that sounds like it means it.

**3. [Will/Behavior] — Build explicit, regular, vocal praise into the architecture of your daily life.** The summons of verse 1–3 is not a call to feel grateful in a general way — it is a call to the servants of the LORD to *bless His name*, verbally and specifically, from morning to evening, across the whole geography of life. The praise called for here is not occasional and private; it is sustained, covenantal, and communal. Examine the actual structure of your days: Where does explicit, named, spoken praise to the LORD appear? If the honest answer is “mainly when I feel like it” or “mainly in corporate worship once a week,” the psalm has a word for you. Praise is the vocation of the LORD's servants — build it into morning, midday, and evening in specific, named, verbal form.

**4. [Mind/Belief] — Receive your own story as a psalm-113 story.** The barren woman of verse 9 is not a generic illustration. She is the canonical emblem of the person for whom human resources have run out — for whom the thing most hoped for is the thing most denied. And she is the person to whom God gives a home and children. If you are in an ash-heap season — grieving, depleted, overlooked, failed, unable to produce what you most want to produce — the psalm is written for you specifically. You are not the exception to this God's pattern; you are its intended audience. The reversal is not merely possible; it is the signature move of the God to whom you belong. Receive your own name in this story.

**5. [Affections/Worship] — Worship as the people who know where they came from.** The Egyptian Hallel was sung at Passover — by people who were themselves the children of former slaves, the descendants of those who had been in the ash heap of Egyptian

bondage. Their praise was not abstract; it was the praise of the delivered. Christian worship stands in the same position: those who praise in Psalm 113's register are those who know themselves to have been lifted from the dust by the One who descended into the dust of death and rose again. The Magnificat (Luke 1) and the Christ-hymn (Philippians 2) are Psalm 113 in full canonical flower. Worship from that place — not as people who are doing well and therefore feel thankful, but as people who know they were on the ash heap and are now seated with princes, because the Prince Himself went to the ash heap for them.

---

## Theological Importance

**Theological Importance:** Psalm 113 teaches that God's transcendence and His compassion are not competing attributes requiring careful balance — they are complementary, with transcendence being the very thing that makes compassion staggering. The God who is above all nations and whose glory exceeds the heavens is the same God who stoops to the dust; the one attribute intensifies the wonder of the other. The psalm also establishes that divine sovereignty expresses itself in radical reversal — not by lifting those who have helped themselves toward the top, but by going to the lowest position and doing the lifting unilaterally. This is not a God who assists; it is a God who acts. The incomparability formula of verse 5 ("Who is like the LORD our God?") is not rhetorical flourish — it is the theological claim that no other god, no other lord, no other power operates with this combination of infinite exaltation and specific compassion for the broken. The LORD is in a category of one.

---

## Reformed Theological Significance

**Reformed Theological Significance:** Psalm 113 is a foundational display of sovereign grace in doxological form. The reversals of verses 7–9 are not cooperative — the poor do not climb toward God while God reaches down; God reaches all the way down and does the lifting. This is grace functioning as grace: unmerited, unilateral, initiated entirely from above. The Reformed insistence on divine sovereignty in salvation finds its doxological expression here — the God who raises the poor from the dust is the same God who raises the spiritually dead from the ash heap of sin, and the appropriate response in both cases is the same: *Hallelu-Yah*. Furthermore, the Hallel context is covenantal — this is not generic theism but the praise of the redeemed, those who know themselves as "servants of the LORD" precisely because He claimed them, not because they chose Him first. The psalm also guards against a thin sentimentalism about God's love by insisting that it is the incomparably transcendent God who stoops — His love is not the affection of an equal or near-equal but the deliberate, staggering condescension of the Most High. In Christ, this condescension takes its ultimate form: the eternal Son who is above all heavens descends

to the ash heap of death, and is therefore — as Philippians 2 completes the Psalm’s logic — highly exalted.

---

## Main Takeaway

**Main Takeaway:** The God who is higher than the highest heavens goes personally to the ash heap — and He has gone to yours. This is not background information about God’s character. It is the reason you cannot be quiet. Praise Him. Keep praising Him. Let nothing stop you.

---

## Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

### Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Treating the summons as decoration rather than as the point.** The triple *Hallelu-Yah* that opens and closes the psalm is not a liturgical frame around the theological content — it *is* the point. The psalm exists to produce praise, not merely to inform about God. A sermon that explains the theology of verses 4–9 competently but leaves the congregation feeling instructed rather than ignited has missed the Primary Claim. The exposition must move all the way to actual, felt, willed worship — not merely to accurate theology about God.
- **Preaching divine transcendence and compassion as a balance problem.** The psalm does not call its readers to hold transcendence and compassion in creative tension. It uses transcendence to *fuel* wonder at the compassion. The stooping is staggering *because* He is so high. Preaching that presents these as two attributes that need to be kept in check against each other flattens the psalm’s deliberately constructed argumentative architecture.
- **Moralizing the reversal passages into an ethics of social action.** Verses 7–9 describe what God does, with God as the grammatical subject throughout. Turning these verses into a mandate for the congregation’s social justice activity (without first letting them be what they are — a description of divine behavior designed to generate worship) collapses the passage’s doxological claim into an ethical imperative. Social ethics may be a downstream implication, but it cannot be allowed to become the primary claim of a psalm whose subject is consistently and insistently YHWH Himself.
- **Missing the canonical freight of the barren woman.** Preaching verse 9 as a generic illustration of reversal — “even the most desperate situations are not beyond God” — loses the specific canonical resonance with Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, and Elizabeth. These are not interchangeable examples; they are a

cumulative biblical pattern pointing forward to the ultimate divine reversal of the Resurrection. Restore the canonical weight: the barren woman made fruitful is the emblem of the impossible made possible by divine initiative, and this pattern reaches its apex in the Virgin's Son and the empty tomb.

- **Failing to preach Psalm 113 as Egyptian Hallel — losing the Passover and its fulfillment.** This psalm was sung at Passover. Its first hearers were people who knew themselves to be descendants of former slaves — people who had been on the ash heap and had been lifted out by divine action. Preaching the psalm without noting this context produces an abstractly doxological sermon rather than a concretely redemptive one. More significantly, the New Testament church sings this psalm as people who have experienced the greater Passover in Christ: the Lamb has been slain, the death-angel has passed over, and the God who descended into the ash heap of death has been lifted to the highest name. The Hallel context demands a christological landing that abstract theism cannot provide.
- **Producing a sermon that generates admiration for God rather than praise to God.** This is the subtlest pitfall. A congregation can leave a sermon on Psalm 113 saying “What a great God” — which is true — without ever having actually praised Him. The psalm is not a theology lecture; it is a summons to action. The preaching should itself model the summons: not merely *describing* what praise looks like but *calling* the congregation to it, with urgency and specificity, so that the room itself does what the psalm demands. Admiration keeps God at arm's length; praise crosses the distance.