

Reason to Praise

Psalm 147

Turn to Psalm 147 please. Last week we looked at Psalm 1, how the Psalms begin, and today we'll see how they end. The last five Psalms begin and end with "Hallelujah," or in English, "Praise the LORD," "Praise Yahweh," in Hebrew, "Hallelu Yah."

This arrangement, that the last five Psalms begin and end with Praise the LORD, and these five Psalms are each full of praise from beginning to end -- this arrangement is telling us something.

It's telling us where following God ends. At the end God's people praise him with all their might. Along the way there are many other kinds of psalms, because many other things happen in the lives of God's people.

There are psalms that pour out despair to God because he's not helping us, there are psalms that confess sin, there are psalms that teach people to live right. And there are psalms of confidence in God, and psalms of thanks, psalms that ask God to bless the king.

There are as many kinds of psalms as there are experiences of God's people. Great variety. But there is no variety at the end of Psalms. At the end, all that people have to say is: "God, you are great, you do wonderful things, there is none like you, you're our God, and we praise you."

All God's people will praise like that, and we'll do it with all our might. There are not five psalms in a row like that anywhere else, but the last five are like that.

And when the psalms praise God, there is always a reason. Our mind is part of praise. We praise with our heart and our mind both, and the psalms never say "praise the LORD" without telling us why that makes sense. The reason for praising God is the most distinctive thing about Ps 147.

The reason is not complicated: we know God takes care of **us** because we can see him take care of **Creation**. Here is how Ps 147 works: we see God watching over the animals, and the weather, and the stars, and we know that he will be doing just as much for his people, and so we praise him, because we know he will take care of his people every bit as much as his creation.

And some of you are thinking, "**That's** not a very good reason to praise God. I can't see myself getting very excited about **that**." Which may be true, but it misses the point.

The psalms are pathways to God. Ps 147 is a pathway to God. It is not sermon material. I will talk about Ps 147 for a while here this morning, but that's not why it was composed. It is not asking if we feel pleased about this reason for praising God. It is a path to use.

The psalm is an invitation to us to come to God in this way. Come to God praising him in this way. Until you and I actually come to God in this way, the psalm is wasted.

The psalm calls us to praise God for watching over his creation and to praise God for watching over us in the same way as we see him in the rest of creation. The psalm is **not asking** if we think this is a good reason to praise God.

Ps 147 **tells** us that this is a good reason, and it takes us by the hand and says, “Come to God in this way.” And if we will do that, we will find that the psalm changes us, it shapes our mind.

It calls us to join in this praise as best we can, even if it feels awkward and unnatural at the start, but join in as much as we can, and not just once, and then it will begin to make more sense, it won't be as awkward, we'll find we can actually praise God in this way.

Until we use the path, the psalm is dormant, like something in the freezer we forgot about, not being used.

Praise the LORD.

How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him!

Christians differ quite a bit in how much they like the singing part of our worship. That's fine. I did not enjoy that part much until I was about 40 myself. This psalm comes from someone who loves to sing praises to God, and they say that in the first verse.

It is *fitting* to praise him. Given who God is, and that we're his people, praising God is the only thing that fits. Worshiping and thanking him, is the only response that makes sense. If we could see God as he is, and see ourselves before him as we are, we would praise him.

² *The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel.*

³ *He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.*

⁴ *He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name.*

⁵ *Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit.*

It sound like this psalm was written after the exiles returned from Babylon. Life was not easy for them. They were poor, oppressed, and under foreign governors who taxed them mercilessly; we know that about these exiles from other parts of the OT.

This psalm shows confidence in God, here, because of the **stars**. What have verses 3 and 4 to do with each other? It seems like a complete change of topic. *He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name.*

What have the brokenhearted got to do with the stars? Just this, that if God determines the number of stars, and calls them each by name, then he cares for his people, he heals them and binds them up.

Isaiah 40:26-27 *Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. ²⁷ So why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is ignored by my God”?*

In Isaiah 40, the prophet encourages Israel. Israel is living in hard times, and they say to themselves, “My way is hidden from the LORD, my cause is ignored by my God.” How often do **you** feel like that? Often enough, me too. And so did Israel.

The prophet says, *Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.*²⁷ *So why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is ignored by my God”?*

The logic is the same as Ps 147. If God brings out the stars one by one, calls out each one by name, and not one of them is missing, then of course he knows exactly what is happening to his people **and he is taking just as good care of his people as the stars.**

In Isa 40, the prophet encourages discouraged Israel with this. In Ps 147 we are urged to praise God because it is entirely true. *Praise the LORD; He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name.*

⁶ *The LORD sustains the humble but casts the wicked to the ground.* Psalm 147 has three stanzas, and this is the end of the first stanza. Each stanza ends by separating God’s people from those who are not God’s people. Not everyone gets the same care as the stars above us.

According to Ps 147, God is not caring for all people the way he cares for his own. *The LORD sustains the humble but casts the wicked to the ground.*

The “humble” here are those who humble themselves before God. That’s what sets them apart from the wicked. The humble say: “God, I am in your hands, help me to do your will.”

Those are the people God sustains, those are the people who get the same kind care as the stars which God knows also by name. The wicked people are the others, and God is against them.

⁷ *Sing to the LORD with grateful praise; make music to our God on the harp.* This is the beginning of the second stanza. Each stanza begins with a call to praise God. *Sing to the LORD with grateful praise; make music to our God on the harp.*

And now the psalm provides us again with a reason to praise God.

⁸ *He covers the sky with clouds; he supplies earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills.*

⁹ *He provides food for the cattle and for the young ravens when they call.*

We tend to think that people feed domestic animals, cows and chickens and whatever, and God feeds wild animals. No. God feeds domestic animals. They eat grass or grain, and who makes grass grow and grain grow. God provides food for the cattle.

And for wild animals, for the young ravens when they call. Ps 104 says *the lions roar for their prey, and seek their food from God.*

When lions roar they are seeking their food from God, and he answers. In this psalm, when young ravens call they are asking God for food, and he feeds them.

And this means that when **we** call on him he responds to **us**, and for this we praise him.

¹⁰ *His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse, nor his delight in the legs of the warrior;*

¹¹ *the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.*

This is the end of the second stanza, another dividing line between people. A certain kind of person gives God pleasure and delight. It is not strong people. It is people who fear him, and who put their hope in his unfailing love. The God who feeds our domestic animals and feeds wild animals, and who manages the stars one by one, in the same way also cares for his people.

This is the same as the humble at the end of the first stanza, those who humble themselves before God, who say, “God, I am in your hands, help me to do your will.”

¹² *Extol the LORD, Jerusalem; praise your God, Zion.* This is another invitation to praise God, which signals the beginning of the third stanza.

¹³ *He strengthens the bars of your gates and blesses your people within you.*

¹⁴ *He grants peace to your borders and satisfies you with the finest of wheat.*

God gives security to the city and to the land, and he feeds his people generously. Given what the OT says about people living after the exile, and verse tells us the exile to Babylon has happened, it is hard to imagine Jerusalem actually living in great security and plenty.

The psalmist is not experiencing this to the extent that we are. Verses 13-14 are entirely true of us, and therefore we will extol the LORD, and praise our God. We think we have troubles, and don't easily praise God.

But according this psalm we could have war and famine, and that would be worse than what we live with, and the reason we don't have war and famine is nothing more or less than God's undeserved kindness to us. Let's praise him for that!

¹⁵ *He sends his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.*

¹⁶ *He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes.*

¹⁷ *He hurls down his hail like pebbles. Who can withstand his icy blast?*

¹⁸ *He sends his word and melts them; he stirs up his breezes, and the waters flow.*

These four verses were made for people in Manitoba. In not many other places are the coldest week of winter and the warmest week of summer so completely different from each other.

God sends his command. His word runs swiftly – sometimes the weather changes pretty fast. God spreads snow, scatters frost, God hurls down hail and send those bitterly cold winds.

Then he sends his word again, and the south wind blows and it gets warm, the snow melts and the waters flow and summer comes. God's word and command does this every year, every year we see massive evidence of God's command and his word in action.

And that same God, for no reason other than his kindness, gives us peace and safety and plenty of food. The weather and the food come from the same God, in the same way. Cold winters and warm summers and our safety and our food all come from the same gracious God.

And you will say, what about all the people who do **not** have safety and food? Many people like that. I have no answer. I can only explain about half of what I myself do, and you want me to explain **God**? All I know is that if we have peace and safety, it is God's kindness, so thank him.

¹⁹ *He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel.*

²⁰ *He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws.*

This is the end of the third stanza, again separating between the people who receive God's favour and those who do not. At the time the psalm was written, only Israel knew about the ways of God.

Now God has included Gentiles, and the gospel has spread far, and we have the Scriptures in our own hands to read to have it taught in our gatherings so we can know God's ways.

God has shown us his word, his laws and his ways, with the same kind of sovereign power that sends winter wind and snow and then melts it all in spring.

We know about God as the same kind of might act from him. Many people do not know his word. He may reveal it to them yet, but right now we already have his word. The logic of the psalm is that if God has revealed his word to us, revealed himself and the right and wrong ways to live, then of course he will watch over us, care for us, and sustain us.

We don't obey God the way the wind does, and the snow and hail and warm breezes. If what God wanted most from people was obedience, then he would have made us like the wind and snow and warm breezes. Of course we'd do whatever he said. He did not make us like that.

Which means that our obedience is not God's first priority. What he wants is **us**. He wants **us**. He wants us to humble ourselves before him, God, I am in your hands, help me do your will. The LORD delights in those who fear him, who hope in his unfailing love. *Praise the LORD.*

Lord, we praise you. After this psalm, we can do nothing else. If you know the stars by name, and lead them to their places, you also know us by name, and lead us in right paths. We give you grateful praise. If you provide the food for our cattle, and feed young ravens when they call out to you, you also hear us when we call, and you provide for us. We thank you and we praise you. Your power is all around us in the cold of winter and then the flowing warmth of spring. That means your faithful power is also in our homes and in our lives, watching over us. We humble ourselves before you. We are in your hands, help us to do your will. Teach us to fear your name. We put our hope in your unfailing love. We praise you for your favour to us. Amen.