



Psalm 147 - Praise for God's Care for Jerusalem

Introduction

Like Psalm 146, this hymn of praise begins and ends with <<***Praise the Lord!***>> Here the praise is focused on gratitude for some great work of building up Jerusalem, or perhaps rebuilding it after the exile, and for the creator who sustains his creation, especially his chosen people as they depend on him. The psalm alternates between universality, i.e. God rules over and cares for everything and everyone, and particularity, for he has set his own people apart and cares for them especially. Each new section begins with an imperative: 'praise' (v.1), 'sing' (v.7), and 'praise' (v.12).

Psalm 147:1-6 - Praise the Lord Who Sustains the Humble.

It is a good and fitting thing to sing in praise of the God who rules the universe, who determines the number of the stars, and who at the same time builds up Jerusalem, gathers the outcasts of Israel perhaps after the exile, heals the broken-hearted, lifts up the humble, and casts the wicked to the ground. In this psalm, the 'broken-hearted' and 'humble' are members of God's own people who look to him in faith. The God whose understanding is beyond measure is more than able to carry out his great plan for Jerusalem. His greatness never implies remoteness from his faithful, nor does it mean indifference to the unfaithful.

- 1 Praise the Lord!
How good it is to sing praises to our God;
for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.

Psalm 147:1

Praise the Lord! Psalm 147 begins and ends with these words, which are both a declaration and an encouragement of praise to Yahweh. This *hallelujah* begins and ends the final five songs that conclude the Book of Psalms.

How good it is to sing praises to our God. It was right for the psalmist to tell himself and others to praise the Lord, and he assumed that God's people would do it with singing. The goodness of praise comes from the truth that it is, in itself, pleasant and beautiful.

True praise is fitting for such an awesome God and it is right that his people should praise him, for: <<*Praise befits the upright*>> (Psalm 33:1b). Adam Clarke commented, "It is decent, befitting, and proper that every intelligent creature should acknowledge the Supreme Being: and as he does nothing but good to the children of men, so they should speak good of his name."

- 2 The Lord builds up Jerusalem;
he gathers the outcasts of Israel.
- 3 He heals the broken-hearted,
and binds up their wounds.
- 4 He determines the number of the stars;
he gives to all of them their names.
- 5 Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;
his understanding is beyond measure.
- 6 The Lord lifts up the downtrodden;
he casts the wicked to the ground.

Psalm 147:2-6

The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. The psalmist quickly began to describe the goodness and greatness of God, to give himself and others reasons to praise God. The first reason is God's active care for Jerusalem and a likely reference to its restoration after the exile, as promised by the Lord around a thousand years earlier: <<*Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back*>> (Deuteronomy 30:4), and: <<*Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name"*>> (Nehemiah 1:8-9).

In a sermon titled 'Good Cheer for Outcasts', Spurgeon considered the many kinds of outcasts that Jesus gathers and blesses today:

- Outcasts may be the very poorest and most despised among people.

- Outcasts may be those who have made themselves so by their wickedness.
- Outcasts may be those who judge themselves to be outcasts.
- Outcasts may be backsliders from the church.
- Outcasts may be those who have fallen into great depression of spirit.
- Outcasts may be those who suffer for the sake of righteousness.

He heals the broken-hearted. God does not only care for communities, but also for individuals. Those who hurt - the broken-hearted and the wounded - are special objects of his care: <<*For he wounds, but he binds up; he strikes, but his hands heal*>> (Job 5:18), and: <<*I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice*>> (Ezekiel 34:16).

Spurgeon remarked, “Hearts are broken through disappointment. Hearts are broken through bereavement. Hearts are broken in ten thousand ways, for this is a heart-breaking world; and Christ is good at healing all manner of heart breaks.” Spurgeon also described many reasons why Jesus is good at healing the broken-hearted:

- Jesus is educated for this work, having his own heart broken.
- Jesus is experienced in this work, having healed broken hearts for 2,000 years.
- Jesus is willing to take the worst patients, and has never yet lost a patient: <<*I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled*>> (John 17:12b).
- Jesus heals broken hearts with medicine that he himself provides.

He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names.

The same God who cares for the lowly individual also knows and names all the stars. His majesty extends in both directions, from the span of the universe to the individual need. The psalmist allows individuals to make the logical point - that if God knows and names all the stars, he certainly knows each person and names them: <<*But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows*>> (Luke 12:7). Alexander Maclaren commented, “Calling them all by names (literally he calls names to them all) is not giving them designations, but summoning them as a captain reading the muster roll of his band. It may also imply full knowledge of each individual in their countless hosts.”

Great is our Lord, and abundant in power. The psalmist again described God in the high aspects of his majesty, i.e. his understanding is beyond measure, and in the lowest and most compassionate aspects of his majesty, that is, the Lord lifts up the downtrodden. Isaiah 40:25-29 uses the same idea to encourage the faithful

never to lose heart: God has the wisdom and the power to carry through his purposes, with such care that ‘not one is missing.’ Derek Kidner commented, “It turns upside down the familiar argument that in so great a universe our small affairs are too minute to notice.” And Spurgeon added, “There is no fathoming his wisdom, or measuring his knowledge. He is infinite in existence, in power, and in knowledge, as these three phrases plainly teach us.”

The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground. This is much like the phrase repeated three times in the Scriptures - God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble; refer to Proverbs 3:34, James 4:6, and 1 Peter 5:5. Spurgeon noted, “He reverses the evil order of things. The meek are down, and he lifts them up; the wicked are exalted, and he hurls them down to the dust.”

Psalm 147:7-11 - Praise the Lord Who Provides for Those Who Fear Him.

The next section moves from God’s universal provision, providing rain so that all animals have food, to his special care for his faithful. The godly are secure, not because they have superior strength, whether by the warrior’s horse or own athleticism, but because they fear God and hope in his steadfast love as pledged in his covenant, and the Lord takes pleasure in them; refer also to the comment made on Psalm 146:3-4.

- 7 Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre.
- 8 He covers the heavens with clouds,
prepares rain for the earth,
makes grass grow on the hills.
- 9 He gives to the animals their food,
and to the young ravens when they cry.

Psalm 147:7-9

Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving. As people understand God’s majesty in both its higher and lower expression, it should create in them a natural response in praise: <<*Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name*>> (Psalm 30:4). Christians too bring their praise with song, **with thanksgiving**, and with music, in the psalmist’s day **to our God on the lyre** and today on a variety of modern instruments. Spurgeon remarked, “He is ‘our God,’ whether he be the God of other men or not. He is ‘our God’ by his choice of us, and by our choice of him; ‘our God’ by eternal covenant, to whom we also pledge ourselves.”

He covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth. God's power and loving care come together again in his work in nature. He brings rain, he makes grass grow, and he gives to the animals their food: *<<And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so>>* (Genesis 1:30), *<<These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things>>* (Psalm 104:27-28), and: *<<Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?>>* (Matthew 6:26).

- ¹⁰ His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the speed of a runner;
- ¹¹ but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.

Psalm 147:10-11

His delight is not in the strength of the horse. Although it is easy to think of the horse here as an animal used for pulling loads and ploughing fields, the image here is most likely that of a war horse: *<<Do you give the horse its might? Do you clothe its neck with mane?>>* (Job 39:19), and: *<<Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but our pride is in the name of the Lord our God>>* (Psalm 20:7); likewise, the legs of a warrior are swift for battle: *<<He made my feet like the feet of a deer, and set me secure on the heights>>* (Psalm 18:33), and: *<<Flight shall perish from the swift, and the strong shall not retain their strength, nor shall the mighty save their lives; those who handle the bow shall not stand, and those who are swift of foot shall not save themselves, nor shall those who ride horses save their lives>>* (Amos 2:14-15).

People often take great interest in the power of God's creation, whether it is the strength of the horse or the speed of a runner. God created these things, but they are not what fundamentally delight him: *<<for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart>>* (1 Samuel 16:7b).

But the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him. What God takes pleasure in is the reverence and trust of his people. Those who find their hope in his steadfast love delight God, because they honour him with their trust.

On those who fear him, those who hope, Spurgeon commented, "Marks of new birth are fear and hope. They fear, for they are sinners; they hope, for God is merciful. They fear him, for he is great; they hope in him, for he is good. Their

fear sobers their hope; their hope brightens their fear: God takes pleasure in them both in their trembling and in their rejoicing.”

Psalm 147:12-20 - Praise the Lord Who Favours Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, standing for all of God’s people, should praise the Lord, who alone provides security and prosperity for her people. The Lord governs all the processes of nature (the snow, frost, and ice, when melted, produce flowing waters), and he is more than able to supply peace and the finest of the wheat to his people; and above all that, he has distinguished his people out of all other nations with his word and his law. These are terms for God’s covenantal revelation to his people (refer to the comment made on Psalm 119), and are grounds for his faithful ones to praise him.

- 12 Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem!
Praise your God, O Zion!
- 13 For he strengthens the bars of your gates;
he blesses your children within you.
- 14 He grants peace within your borders;
he fills you with the finest of wheat.
- 15 He sends out his command to the earth;
his word runs swiftly.
- 16 He gives snow like wool;
he scatters frost like ashes.
- 17 He hurls down hail like crumbs —
who can stand before his cold?
- 18 He sends out his word, and melts them;
he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow.

Psalm 147:12-18

Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! The exhortation to praise comes again, with another *hallelujah*. The more people understand and explain the power and care of God, the more they should praise him.

For he strengthens the bars of your gates. This begins a series of four great and compassionate acts of God for his people. Each of these gives reason for praise.

Worship is not empty adoration; it is gratitude for specific goodness and the anticipation of future goodness:

- God provides security (he strengthens the bars of your gates).
- God provides a future (he blesses your children within you).
- God provides peace (he grants peace within your borders).
- God gives provision (he fills you with the finest of wheat).

On he strengthens the bars of your gates Alexander Maclaren commented, “The fortifications of Jerusalem are now complete, and their strength gives security to the people gathered into the city. Over all the land once devastated by war peace broods, and the fields that lay desolate now have yielded harvest.”

He sends out his command to the earth. This begins a series of short descriptions of God’s presence and work in the natural world. God’s work in the natural world begins with his command to the earth, with his word that runs very swiftly. <<*How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns’*>> (Isaiah 52:7), and: <<*Look! On the mountains the feet of one who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace! Celebrate your festivals, O Judah, fulfil your vows, for never again shall the wicked invade you; they are utterly cut off*>> (Nahum 1:15). The apostle Paul asked for prayer in 2 Thessalonians 3:1, requesting that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified. Paul probably had v.15 in mind when he wrote that. Spurgeon remarked, “If God’s word runs very swiftly, then it can even overtake those who run away from it. Not only can the Lord come quickly to those who seek him, but he can overtake those who hasten away from him.”

He gives snow like wool. The psalmist considered God’s power as it is seen in cold weather. The snow, the frost, the hail, and the cold are all expressions of his power in nature. Then, when God sends out his word and melts them, it is another expression of his power. Hebrews 1:3 describes Jesus as the one who is upholding all things by the word of his power. Verse 18 is a reminder that even the natural order of snow and melting and flowing waters happens as God sends out his word: <<*he sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction*>> (Psalm 107:20).

- 19 He declares his word to Jacob,
his statutes and ordinances to Israel.
- 20 He has not dealt thus with any other nation;
they do not know his ordinances.
- Praise the Lord!

Psalm 147:19-20

He declares his word to Jacob. The same God that orders and directs the natural world through his word has also brought the revelation of his heart and mind through his word to Israel. He has declared his statutes and ordinances to Israel: <<*Moses charged us with the law, as a possession for the assembly of Jacob*>> (Deuteronomy 33:4), <<*This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful*>> (Joshua 1:8), <<*Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel*>> (Malachi 4:4), and: <<*They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises*>> (Romans 9:4).

The declaration of his word shows that God regards humanity as rational and capable of relationship. Kidner observed, “So by addressing us, not programming us, God shows that he seeks a relationship, not simply a sequence of actions carried out.” Spurgeon added, “He who is the Creator is also the Revealer. We are to praise the Lord above all things for his manifesting himself to us as he does not unto the world.”

He has not dealt thus with any other nation. God uniquely chose Israel to be the receivers and guardians of his revealed word. He did not choose the Philistines or the Egyptians for this role. The other nations have not known the judgements of God, that is, his word. As the apostle Paul would later write in Romans 3:2 that one of the chief advantages God gave to Israel is that he committed to them the oracles of God. Israel received this responsibility seriously, and took great care to copy, learn, and preserve the Hebrew Scriptures.

Maclaren concluded, “The psalmist is not rejoicing that other nations have not received these, but that Israel has. Its privilege is its responsibility. It has received them that it may obey them, and then that it may make them known.”

Praise the Lord! Understanding the greatness of God, his care for humanity and all of nature, and the remarkable power and nature of his word should move the Lord’s people to praise him all the more. *Hallelujah!*