

# Why We Praise the Lord

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**Bible Text:** Psalm 147

**Preached on:** Sunday, November 1, 2015

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Let's take our Bibles and let's go back to the book of Psalms tonight, Psalm 147. Psalm 147. This is a Psalm that I believe, with many others, that was written after the completion of the walls and the restoration of Israel back to the Promised Land. There are several reasons for that, but one of the main ones is the way the Psalm is written, it could really parallel no other time in Israel's history and if you look at some of the statements in Nehemiah about the celebration after the wall was completed, it matches that very closely also. So you have some powerful things going on here. The psalmist is reflecting on God's great favor and goodness to creation, to the ecological system, and his command over nature; then God's special favor and care for Israel, in bringing her to this place of gladness and blessing and joy. We sang a song earlier that talked about we're to bless the Lord and praise the Lord when things aren't so good and when things aren't such a blessing, at least from our perspective, we do know sometimes the hard times turn out to be great blessings, but there are also seasons and times when God just favors his people. He just gives us good days in many ways: maybe financially, or health, or our marriage is going great or whatever it may be; kids are doing good or the company you work for decides to raise your retirement a bunch or something, you know, like that happens a lot, right? But God just does good stuff to bless his people. Now, more than that, of course, is the spiritual blessing of oneness with Christ, but you can't separate out that God does not choose for his own purposes and just out of his goodness to bless his people in many ways. So we see God's special blessing to Israel, his general blessing and care for creation, but also I agree with Matthew Henry: you cannot help but see the picture and a type of God's blessing for his church and those who are regenerate in this age, in the church age, and how God specially has chosen to favor us.

Well, let's look at it together, Psalm 147. The psalmist begins by saying,

1 Praise the LORD! For it is good to sing praises to our God; For it is pleasant and praise is becoming.

It's almost as if he says in verse 1, "Well, I'll just do that anyway," but then starting in verse 2 he says, "But look what he's done for us."

2 The LORD builds up Jerusalem; He gathers the outcasts of Israel. 3 He heals the brokenhearted And binds up their wounds. 4 He counts the

number of the stars; He gives names to all of them. 5 Great is our Lord and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite. 6 The LORD supports the afflicted; He brings down the wicked to the ground. 7 Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving; Sing praises to our God on the lyre, 8 Who covers the heavens with clouds, Who provides rain for the earth, Who makes grass to grow on the mountains. 9 He gives to the beast its food, And to the young ravens which cry. 10 He does not delight in the strength of the horse; He does not take pleasure in the legs of a man. 11 The LORD favors those who fear Him, Those who wait for His lovingkindness. 12 Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion! 13 For He has strengthened the bars of your gates; He has blessed your sons within you. 14 He makes peace in your borders; He satisfies you with the finest of the wheat. 15 He sends forth His command to the earth; His word runs very swiftly. 16 He gives snow like wool; He scatters the frost like ashes. 17 He casts forth His ice as fragments; Who can stand before His cold? 18 He sends forth His word and melts them; He causes His wind to blow and the waters to flow. 19 He declares His words to Jacob, His statutes and His ordinances to Israel. 20 He has not dealt thus with any nation; And as for His ordinances, they have not known them. Praise the LORD!

Matthew Henry said that praising God is a work which is its own wages. That's a great line. Praising God is a work which is its own wages. A child of God cannot throw...I don't care where you are, how despondent, depressed, discouraged, if you will cast your will to praise God, there are blessings that flow back every single time. As I have said many times, not original with me, sometimes you can't pray your way through something and you'll just go ahead and praise your way through it. Find you a place where people won't think you're drunk and throw your hands toward heaven and I mean verbally praise God and watch the blessing come back; watch the encouragement come to your soul.

Well, Israel had great, great reason to praise God in this setting. They are rejoicing over the wondrous favor God has shown them. Israel has been in Babylonian captivity for 70 years, finally Cyrus, the Persian, overthrows Babylon and Cyrus had a policy to let all the peoples whom he held captive go back to their native lands, rebuild their religions, rebuild their cities and go about their life the best they were before they were held captive; he thought that would make them more loyal subjects. So Nehemiah was given the blessing of Cyrus to go back and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and this Psalm was most likely written at the completion of that as they are just full of great joy at God's blessing to bring them back out of captivity to restoration. Of course, there is a powerful spiritual truth there. They are in captivity because of their idolatry, callousness and sin against God, so God in wondrous grace, casts his favor of forgiveness and grace toward Israel and brought them back into intimacy. Wow, what a parallel we can see in our own hearts and lives, can't we? There is the picture in the Song of Solomon of the wife which represents the church or the child of God, and the groom, of course, represents Jesus. And the wife is cold toward her husband's advances and she walks out the door and shuts him out and she goes out into the world, kind of breaching her fellowship with her husband. Then as she goes out into the world, she is roughly treated by the men of the city and she

is abused and taken advantage of and finally she runs back to her husband. Then as she comes back to him, he is waiting with a bouquet of flowers and says, "I have been waiting for you." Instead of chastising her or rebuking her or dressing her down, he's just waiting with the flowers. "You've been on my heart and you are welcomed back." Well, that's the way Jesus is to his own. That's the way he was to Israel, welcoming her back to Jerusalem and back into his fellowship.

So, first of all, and I've organized this this way and, once again, these truths overlap but I think all of them are clearly here so here's the way I am going to organize it. First of all, praise the Lord for his compassion in verses 1 through 6. Of course, verse 1 is just that general praise that it's right and good to sing praise to the Lord. Then he talks about those who are brokenhearted or maybe we should say were brokenhearted, should praise the Lord. Look at it in verses 2 and 3, it says, "The LORD builds up Jerusalem." You and I can't comprehend what that would have meant to a Jewish heart to know that Jerusalem, God's city, the place where God speaks to us, the place where my God blesses us, has been rebuilt. It's no longer in ruins.

And, "He gathers the outcasts of Israel." Now, the Jews were often the outcasts. They were the scourge of the earth. The Egyptians controlled them and enslaved them. The Babylonians controlled and enslaved them. The Persians controlled them and enslaved them. Then again, Cyrus the Persian gives them the freedom to come back into their homeland and rebuild the city. Now, we know sometimes we become the outcasts because of our sin, but then there are some times when you become an outcast in this world because of your stand. You stand for what's right and stand for truth and the world will cast you away.

But God's people today live in a world that is ungodly. As a matter of fact, there has never been a time when the world was not ungodly. There have been seasons when certain cultures and countries were very favorable toward our beliefs and our doctrine, but you and I are living in a country that is fast abandoning the Judeo-Christian ethic we were built on and it has become a secular nation whereby they are taking a very aggressive and negative view toward everything we believe and everything we stand on. So we can relate a little bit to being in a country where we look around and think, "This doesn't fit me. These are not my values. This is not the things I believe in." That was probably not true 50 or 75 years ago in the United States of America. Well, that's a little feeling, not much, but a little feeling like the Jews must have felt when they were in the pagan confines of Egypt or Babylon or Persia. When they looked at the values and the foreign and pagan idolatries and the gross and vile immoralities that existed, the brutality of those peoples, and they thought, "Oh, to be back honoring God's law and living in God's truth."

They're saying, "God brought us back. We were brokenhearted but he heals the brokenhearted," verse 3 says, "And binds up their wounds." You know, a broken heart is just part and parcel of living in a fallen world. You're going to have your heart broken and it's very real when it happens and, as a matter of fact, it can be devastating when it happens. But thank God he is a God who cares deeply for his own when they have a

broken heart. Boy, you've got to be very, very careful when you are brokenhearted that you don't become bitter spirited. Don't become bitter spirited when you're brokenhearted. "What's the key to that, pastor?" Praise. You'd better learn to look at your predicament, you'd better learn to look at what hurts you and pains you, you'd better learn to look at it and say, "My God dictated these circumstances and I will choose to praise him. I will choose to praise him as an act of the will until my emotions catch up and get happy about it."

He heals the brokenhearted. He will bless you and maybe the problem is you haven't gone to him acknowledging these things in your life that break your heart and praising God for knowing what he's doing. It doesn't mean you praise God for the actual evil of something that may have happened to you or some injustice that has happened to you. Of course not, and there may be a basis for having some sort of action taken on your behalf, especially if it's something that's criminal or just wicked. Of course, that's true. But at the end of the day, you've got to know a sovereign God oversees everything and you don't know all that he is accomplishing. You can't trace his hand in it but you can trust his heart. He's the God who heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. Israel had experienced that 70 years. It didn't happen immediately; 70 years, but eventually they're back in God's land, in God's city, with God's blessing. He heals the disappointed heart. He heals the downtrodden heart. He heals the denying heart. Sometimes the best healing we can have is a trip to the woodshed so that we can get ourselves back in a faith position before him.

Well, let me say this about his compassion. I've been talking about it being for the brokenhearted, secondly, I want to talk about how boundless it is in its capacity. How boundless in its capacity. Look at verse 4, "He counts the number of the stars; He gives the names to all of them. Great is our Lord and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite." It's kind of interesting how the psalmist jumps from the specific situation Israel was in to God counts the stars. I think what he's saying here: God counts the stars because he can. He has a capacity we don't have. He is boundless in capacity. He has infinite ability. Man is finite. God can count the stars, man cannot. As a matter of fact, did you know science, modern science, not modern modern science, but modern science. You see, there used to be modern science and then we had modern modern science that we've got today. Old modern science was typically theistic. It said God created everything, let's figure out how he made it and really they used a scientific method. Then scientists God real, real brilliant one day and just without any facts in reality, without any hypothesis, without anything to observe they just said, "Okay, we've got to throw out the concept of God and just have science without a Creator." That's modern modern science. But modern science used to say there are about 4,000 stars in the universe. We've since learned there's just a few more than that. But God can count every one of them. This speaks of his omnipresence. The point is, the children of Israel are saying, "Look at the boundless capacity of this God and he has chosen to focus this boundless capacity of compassion toward us." A powerful truth. He names all of them. This speaks of his omniscience. He knows all. Today, astronomers tell us there are over 100 billion stars in our galaxy. Wrap your mind around that. And then over 100 million galaxies in known space. And known space is likely only one billionth of theoretical space. That's a lot of

stuff and God has named every star in every galaxy, even in what we might call theoretical space. Why is the psalmist pointing this out? He is boundless in capacity. His capacity to care for you and love you and show compassion is overwhelming.

He continues on and he says he calls all of them by name. This speaks also of his omnipotence. In other words, he has all right and authority to call them by name or give them a name or speak of their name. He submitted to no one when he gave orders to name them. He asked no one's permission as to what to name them. He wasn't obligated to seek any advice in naming them. I suppose he could have called up Gabriel or Michael and said, "What do you guys think about this name?" I don't know how God did it but the point is he's God and the children of Israel are saying, "And this God has chosen to bring special favor upon us and we are enjoying that in our restoration." He is boundless in capacity.

But that compassion that he is boundless in, it does have boundaries in application. There are some boundaries in application. Look at verse 6, "The LORD supports the afflicted." That had to be directed strictly at Israel as she was afflicted in her captivity. The last line of verse 6 but, "He brings down the wicked to the ground." Now, it has been the case from time immemorial, the skeptics and the scorners and the deniers have always, and today the "secular progressives," have always put a twist on God's affection and on God's compassion. "God is compassionate," they would say, "so he blesses this activity. He blesses that activity. He thinks one is just as valuable as the other. One behavior is just as pleasing as another behavior." That's a twist. There are boundaries to God's compassion. He has compassion to the afflicted and the context here would be those who are afflicted because their own knowledge of their sinfulness and in Israel's case, the affliction they received from a godless world as they tried to live for God. God has boundless compassion for them but there are boundaries that he does not give this kind of compassion to those who are living for self, who live by the flesh, whose eyes are only on the ends of this earth and they live only for the lust and the pleasures this world can give them and they find, listen to me, they find no pleasures in God.

You see, that's the privilege you and I have as Christians is that we have been given grace and a new heart whereby we are in a fight, in a struggle, to find pleasure in God. Are you listening to me? We have the gift of being able to increasingly find and know the pleasures of God, where the worldlings of this world are in a hopeless, blinded, bondage and stronghold to only get pleasure out of this world and the base desires of the fallen nature. That's all they have. That's it and that's why when a country goes secular, they indulge in deeper and more vile and more corrupt base pleasures because it's all they have. It's all they've got. So let's think logically for a moment. You raise a kid and he grows up in a troubled home and maybe he's just truly mentally deficient in some way and you teach him there is no higher value, there are no higher pleasures, there is no God to answer to, there are no realms to reach for beyond this life, all you have is what you can get in this world. So in their minds and understanding, they lost their girlfriend or lost their boyfriend or their job was taken away and so they conclude since this is all there is, that I might as well kill about 20 people and go out myself. Why doesn't that make sense

if this is all there is? You see, when you lose your God-centeredness, you lose sanity. You lose decency.

So the psalmist says right quick here in verse 6, he says, "I've been talking about how boundless God is in his capacity to show compassion, but he does not show it to everyone the same way." Verse 6, "He brings down the wicked to the ground." Everyone is going to get down in life, you just need to make sure that God is not the one who puts you down, because if God puts you down, you're not getting back up. If God puts you down, you're ruined forever and the psalmist points out there are those who refuse God's grace and God's goodness and God will be the one who puts them down.

Well, this is all about God's compassion. I want to shift now and I think the psalmist shifts to talk about God's care. God's care. Certainly they overlap but I think there is a difference here. He gives an illustration of how thoroughly God cares. As we see there in verse 7 and go through verse 9, "Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving; Sing praises to our God on the lyre," here he goes talking about nature, "Who covers the heavens with clouds, Who provides rain for the earth, Who makes grass to grow on the mountains. He gives to the beast its food, And to the young ravens which cry." So here we see that the psalmist says God has absolute sovereign control over the entire ecological order. Everything. Look, the animal kingdom is not functioning by chance under some doctrine of natural selection. The psalmist says God is ordering every bit of that. He even shows care for all of creation. Control and care. None of it just happened by chance.

He ends this whole thing saying the young ravens in verse 9, this section, "He gives the young ravens which cry." That's kind of interesting to me why he picks the ravens out. He's been talking about nature in general and beasts in general and now he says, "God has a special care for the ravens." Do you know why? The ravens are at the very end of the food chain because ravens are primarily scavengers. We may not have ravens in the same way some areas of the world; we have blackbirds, we have crows and I guess that qualifies, but what we do have is buzzards. Have you ever seen a buzzard? We have a flock of buzzards that hang out at my deer camp and they're not welcome, but they hang out there. And I was meditating on this how he says, "God takes care of the entire nature's food chain, all the way down to the raven," verse 9. I thought about that. I thought, you know, every time I go out there, those stinkin' buzzards are sitting around in trees like, "We ain't got a care in the world. We ain't thinkin' about nothin'. We're not worried about anything. We have no concern. Soon enough something's going to get run over and we're going to eat." Well, that's exactly what the psalmist is saying here. Have you ever seen a buzzard be worried? Be concerned that the God of nature cares enough? No, something's going to die. There was an armadillo that died right on the path where we go into our hunting camp. He died right there and I'm telling you, it wasn't a day and a half those buzzards had eaten. He looked like a used oyster on a half shell laying there on his back. I mean, there was nothing left. They ate every morsel of that armadillo. I don't like armadillos either but anyway.

God says, "I show care for everything." What is the psalmist getting to? How much more does he care for favored Israel? How much more does he care, listen to me, to his elect

children in the church? He wants you to get that. He wants you to think on that. Has anybody ever told you to think, there is so little competition? Think on these things? What is God saying? And how encouraging it is.

Well, so he gives an illustration from the world of nature and next I think he gives a qualification. Look at verses 10 and 11, "He does not delight in the strength of the horse," his point is: are you one who delights in the strength of your horses? Now, there had to be a parallel here to like Egypt who marveled in their great horses and their chariots. "He does not take pleasure in the legs of a man." Well, in this day, so many military strategies dealt with the strength of their men to have stamina and run to battle. He said, "Is your confidence there? If your confidence is there, God is not particularly looking to care for you." But, verse 11, in contrast, "The LORD favors those who fear Him, Those who wait for His lovingkindness." In other words, God in his great, great care has not necessarily extended to the self-sufficient the way he extends it to those who see they need God for everything. Don't trust in your military strength, trust in God. The mightiest horses and the most valiant troops cannot stand against the Lord's anointed. Fear him.

Now, look at what he says in verse 11 down there as he concludes this section, "The LORD favors those who fear Him, Those who wait for His lovingkindness." When we fear him, it means we have an accurate and proper understanding of who God is. Do you know why these people don't fear God today? Do you know why they twist God into an image that looks like them instead of letting him be the one true, holy, transcendent God he is as revealed in Scripture? It's because they don't know him. They don't fear him. They don't reverence him. They don't honor him. Aren't you glad that God, listen to me, aren't you glad that God radically contradicts you? If you know anything about you, you're glad God's not just a bigger version of you. Dear God, help us. Praise his name, he is nothing like you and he is nothing like me! He transcends us in every way. He's the God we know and the God who is true and the God who exceeds us in every way.

That's why we quote as the psalmist says here, we fear him. Moms and dads, there should be something in your spirit when you teach your children and your grandchildren where you show them, because, you see, they think you're Superman. They think you're the Hulk. They need to see, "Man, when my daddy, when my granddaddy, when my great granddaddy talks about God, you can see that he is humbled before this God. This God is mighty. He's awesome."

Verse 11 talks about them who wait for, or you could say hope in, his lovingkindness. Now, why do we hope in God's lovingkindness? We fear him because we have an accurate view of God but why do we wait for his lovingkindness? Because we have an accurate view of ourselves. Lovingkindness means, "If he doesn't show me mercy, I'm sunk. I cast myself at the feet of my Lord and I cast myself there with no hope in any one or anything else other than if you don't show me mercy, I'm doomed forever. If you don't show me mercy, I have no hope." God said, "That's the kind of man that will get my boundless, unthwartable care and compassion." What a truth. Israel had experienced that as they are back in Jerusalem and the walls are being built.

So, thirdly, let's go to not only God's compassion and God's care, but let's go to God's capacity. Talked about that some already but I think particularly it comes out beginning in verse 12, "Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem! Praise," here's a good phrase, "your God, O Zion!" In other words, these are the people who in a special way know God. They don't know about God in just some generic way, they truly know God. He's truly their God and, of course, this so parallels what we know through Jesus Christ; we know God in a way that we didn't know him before.

He gives a word of protection here in verse 13, "For He has strengthened the bars of your gates." In this day, you had to have a wall and you had to have a good gate with bars or there is no protection so they're saying, "God gives us that protection." Nehemiah oversaw the rebuilding of the walls, the first time in 100 years that the city of Jerusalem had a gate that could effectively secure them and protect them. There is more than just physical security here, it was the protection we have in God from God's wrath and from the judgment we ought to receive. But God does protect his own and how he has often prevented tragic things in our lives that we will never know of. Perhaps we'll understand more of them in heaven. You don't even know this week what tragedy God thwarted that could have been coming your way because of his protection.

Well, notice verse 13b, your prosperity. He blesses your children and your children's children. "He has blessed your sons within you." In other words, now parents in Israel could have some peace of mind about raising their children in this vicious world and isn't that exactly what we get when God blesses us with a healthy church? It's a place where we can feel like, "I can raise my children here and know there will be an abundance of care and help and assistance and reinforcement of the great doctrines of the faith and protecting my children as I want them to grow in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

Not only protection in their posterity but notice peace here in verse 14, "He makes peace within your borders." Within the walls, as long as, the point is, if we're in those walls that Nehemiah has built and we're behind that great gate that Nehemiah put together, then we know we can have peace in here within the boundaries. I agree with Matthew Henry, you can't help but see that there is a parallel to being in Christ here. If you are in Christ, you can have peace; peace with God and the peace of God. That's what Israel, I think, was enjoying in a physical way, but that's what we all enjoy as believers in Christ in a spiritual way.

Then lastly provision here. "He satisfies you with the finest of the wheat." In other words, God had chosen because of Israel's humility and brokenness and repentance as he brought them back in, he was going to give them the absolute best. The finest of wheat. Be careful to not overreact against the excesses of some in the charismatic movement who basically teach that God is just wanting all the time to make everybody just filthy rich and make you fully healthy. We know that's not true, but be careful because the Bible does give us a number of truths whereby God does delight in doing some good stuff for his children even in this life. Now, you have to walk with the attitude, "Lord, if you give it, hallelujah. If you take it away, hallelujah." Amen? But God does do that, but now make sure that



when God blesses you that you are a good steward of what he blesses you with. He didn't just give Israel anything, he gave her the finest, the finest of the wheat. The finest, no hulls.

Whether we understand it or believe it, God gives to us out of his infinite supply of provision through his infinite knowledge of our need and motivated by his infinite love that he has toward us. You know, every drop of water that comes out of your faucet that sustains you is ordained of God. Every thread of fabric that you clothe yourself with was ordered of God. Every molecule of oxygen that you breathe was approved to be yours from God. Every ray of light that meets your eye came at the instruction of God. He ordains all of these things. If we could only see how totally dependent we are on him then we would say with the psalmist back up there in verse 7, "Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving; Sing praises to our God on the lyre." Oh, what he does for us.

Now quickly, verses 15 through 20: his precepts. "He sends forth His command to the earth; His word runs very swiftly." The psalmist is picturing here that God's word is performance. When God speaks, action happens. He makes things happen. Then he brings out an illustration of nature, "He gives snow like wool," or the elements in nature. "He gives snow like wool; He scatters the frost like ashes. He casts forth His ice as fragments; Who can stand before His cold?" One scholar pointed out that these things are very unusual in this part of the world, things like ice and snow and frost and ice fragments, and the scholar surmises that perhaps what God is saying is God brings forth his word and can do things men don't think can happen. He performs things beyond what men would understand. Isn't that exactly what happens when God's word, the Gospel, comes forth with the power of the Holy Spirit and penetrates your heart? God miraculously changes people and men don't think that's possible. I mean, we live in a culture today that thinks you can legislate everything. "If we just do external laws, we can just make everybody love each other and we're going to all be equal and everything is going to be just perfect for everybody. If we can pass enough laws and enough executive orders." The psalmist says it's right the upside down: God comes in with power and can change men's hearts from the inside out. The word is the agency which controls everything and controls everything that happens in the earth.

Let's go on to verses 19 and 20, "He declares His words to Jacob, His statutes and His ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any nation." God, listen to me, God is sovereign in electing who he sends his word to. He chose in the Old Testament era to especially give his truth to the descendents of Abraham and that's exactly what the psalmist is rejoicing in here. The psalmist is not saying, "Aha! Weren't we worthy. We were special. We deserve special care from God." Absolutely not. It was totally, completely unmerited favor but no scholar of any stripe, you go to the far wing of the Arminian party to the far wing of the Calvinist party, no scholar can debate that God gave special favor to the descendents of Abraham. He gave him his ordinances and his precepts and his truth. No other nation was given that like Israel.

Listen to me, if you're a born-again child of God, somehow in the glorious purposes of God for his own honor and fame, he chose to give you something he hasn't given

somebody else. "Pastor, how can that be?" I don't know except God is God and what should that do to you? That should humble you to say, "Oh God, I'm unworthy but I am grateful that just as you particularly," how does he say it again, last verse here? "He has not dealt thus with any nation; And as for His ordinances, they have not known them." So we should be praising the Lord for this special favor that he is shown to us. Now listen, the special favor of slaying you with the understanding of your wretched, offensive standing before him and then liberating you with the glorious truth that Christ has taken your weakness and failure upon himself and atoned for those sins when he died on the cross and you are complete. Wasn't that in the small group lesson today? You are complete. You have been made perfect before God in Christ Jesus. Praise the Lord. Amen. And amen. He who has ears to hear. Jesus didn't just say, "Everybody hear!" He said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Let's stand in prayer.