

It is fitting that we come to Psalm 147 on the first Sunday of a new year.

In the midst of winter – with the snow like wool –
the crystals of ice being hurled down like crumbs.

It hasn't been so awfully cold yet –
but we all know that the cold is coming!

And even though winter has only just begun –
we look forward to when our Lord sends out his word and melts the snow and ice –
making his wind blow and the waters flow!

Do you think that way about the change in seasons?
Do you see the change in seasons as the handiwork of your God?
Do you feel the wind as *his breath*?
His command brings the snow – his word brings all things to pass...

Introduction: Praise the LORD...

Psalm 147 is a “hallelujah” song –
the opening line and the closing line of the Psalm are, in Hebrew, “Hallelu-Jah.”

Praise the LORD!

We are in the final doxology of the Psalter –
Psalms 146-150 –
songs that give praise to the LORD in a final crescendo of praise
where

In your outline, I've given you a snapshot of the “oddness” of this Psalm.
Whereas most psalms move from one theme to another,
Psalm 147 uses the same themes – interwoven throughout.

... Who Builds His City – from Jerusalem to the Stars...and the Weak (v1-6)
... Who Provides for All Creation – and Especially Those Who Fear Him (v7-11)
... Who Strengthens His City – and Governs All Nature – and Especially Israel (v12-20)

There are clearly three sections –
each beginning with a call to praise.
But the sections overlap thematically –
thereby tying together the themes –
showing us that God's purposes for Jerusalem are not just temporary or earthly.
God's purposes for Jerusalem are heavenly – and include all of creation –
but is still very much centered *here*.

In that way, Psalm 147 is very much of an answer to the song that we will sing after the sermon –
Psalm 102.

Psalm 102 comes from Book IV of the Psalter –
a song that reflects on how Jerusalem is broken down –
and how the LORD *will* build up Jerusalem
Psalm 102 was a lament on the same themes that Psalm 147 is a song of praise!

Of course, the irony is that in the days of Book V of the Psalms –
the condition of Jerusalem is really not much better than in Book IV!

Jerusalem is still a little city of no worldly account.
There is no Son of David on the throne.
There is no particular reason to see any grand future before them.

How does one sing praise in a day of small things?
Not because of who we are!
Not because of our great ability!

But because *our God* is great!

1. ... Who Builds His City – from Jerusalem to the Stars...and the Weak (v1-6)

Praise the LORD!
For it is good to sing praises to our God;
for it is pleasant,^[4] and a song of praise is fitting.

The Psalmist starts by reminding us that it is *good* and *fitting* to sing praise to our God.
And, what is more, it is pleasant – it is lovely – it is beautiful.

We heard this morning the war of words between the Beast and the Lamb.
We see tonight the *beauty* of praising the Lamb!

I couldn't help but laugh with delight on New Year's Eve –
as we sang the praise of our Savior for the better part of the evening!
It is good to sing praises to our God!
It is beautiful – and because you have worked at it consistently,
it is not only beautiful to the heart – but it is also beautiful to the ear!

Verses 2-6 then remind us *why* it is so good and beautiful and fitting.

It's because:

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

³ *He heals the brokenhearted*

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 humble;^[b]
he casts the wicked to the ground.*

He builds his city – from Jerusalem to the stars – and especially the weak.

The Psalmist recognizes that God has a plan for Jerusalem
that is not just about establishing a little kingdom in the Middle East!
The LORD – the covenant God of Israel –
has a plan and a purpose for all the universe that is centered on Jerusalem.

Think about how he says this.

The LORD builds up Jerusalem – he gathers the outcasts of Israel.
Not just Judah.

Israel had fallen 140 years before Jerusalem.
Israel had been in exile – and never was restored.

But Psalm 147 says that the LORD gather the outcasts of Israel.
Yes, there was *some* of that in the Second Temple period –
but as the hostility between the Samaritans and the Jews indicates,
not much.

But our Lord Jesus gathered the outcasts of Israel,
when he told the Samaritan woman that he was the one who restored the outcasts.
“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”

She was wounded – she had been through six husbands –
and was living with a seventh man, who was not even her husband...

Yes, she was a sinner – but he pardoned her sin, and he bound up her wounds –
and through her he began to gather the outcasts of Israel. (John 4)

And his disciples remembered this –
and so they went and preached in Samaria (Acts 8) –
because Jesus had said that they would be his witnesses
in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria –
and to the ends of the earth.

Jesus builds up his holy city.
He restores and gathers his people.

And what is more:

³ *He heals the brokenhearted*

and binds up their wounds.
⁴ *He determines the number of the stars;*
he gives to all of them their names.

I want to deal with these together – because the Psalmist does!
How on earth does healing the brokenhearted relate to naming the stars?!

I think of all the times that I've heard people say
“Why talk so much about theology – just get practical!”
The Psalmist says that our theology is intimately practical!

Because theology is simply *the knowledge of God*.
Knowing God is at the heart of the Christian life.
The God of the universe – the God who determines the number of the stars –
the God who gives to all of them their names –
it is this God who heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

And he does this – not from afar –
but as the Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep.
As the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us.
Like the Good Samaritan – who came and bound up the wounds of the Jew in the ditch!

He is God Almighty – he dwells in a high and holy place –
and yet he draws near to the contrite and lowly.

Indeed, the greatest comfort – the greatest practical consolation –
that a Christian receives is intimately theological:
“Jesus loves me, this I know – for the Bible tells me so.”
That is a profound theological statement –
and no less profound for being so simple!

At the heart of Christian theology is the combination of the greatness of God
and the mercy of God.
That the Creator of the universe would also humble himself to become one of his creatures –
for us – and for our salvation.

⁵ *Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;*
his understanding is beyond measure.

The same word is used in both verses 4 and 5.
“He *determines* the number of the stars”
and “his understanding is beyond *measure*.”

The basic idea is to “count” or “number” or “reckon” –
he is the one who counts the number of the stars –

but his understanding is beyond counting.

But how do you see the abundant power of God revealed?

How do you see that his understanding is beyond measure?

Because

⁶ *The LORD lifts up the humble;^[b]
he casts the wicked to the ground.*

The LORD has the power to make things right.

The humble – the meek – those who are oppressed by the powerful –
he lifts up.

But the wicked – those who oppress the meek and humble –
he casts to the ground.

Do you sometimes get a little nervous about the Bible's tendency to exalt the poor and humble?

That nervousness is rooted in a form of the prosperity gospel.

A friend sent me a timely excerpt from a book she was reading
regarding a fundamental theological flaw in American evangelical thought.

American Christians have often thought of themselves as playing a central role in world history.

It's called "American exceptionalism."

It's the idea that America has a unique role in eschatology –
that we will be the ones who are used by God for the salvation of the world –
whether through missions, through political influence –
or some other way.

But this author says well what happens when you think of yourself (or your country) as *special*.

"The assumption of the exceptional character of the American church
leads to a belief in the inevitable triumph of the American church....

Because of this self-perception that emerges from a dysfunctional theology,
acts of aggression and dominance by exceptional people can be deemed as acceptable.

At all costs, therefore, the exceptional American church must flourish.

The excessive level of triumphalism results in the seeking of human power and human authority
to assert the agenda of American Christianity.

Ecclesiastical life that emerges from a triumphalist church
results in the belief that God has ordained the American church agenda
and therefore the actions of the American church –
no matter dysfunctional or destructive –
to serve the purpose of God."

And then comes the punch line:

“Excessive celebration of exceptionalism and triumphalism
results in the absence of lament for the American church.”
Unsettling Truths-The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery by Mark
Charles and Soong-Chan Rah (p8-9)

And not surprisingly,
when you lose the ability to lament –
you eventually the ability to *truly* rejoice!

What is there to celebrate – if there is nothing wrong?
And why is the church drying up in America?
Because we have lost sight of God’s mercy in restoring the weak!

The second stanza in verses 7-11
then explore this theme of the God who doesn’t need us –
the God who takes pleasure in us –
but not because of what we can do for him!!
He is entirely competent to do all his holy will without us!!

2. ... Who Provides for All Creation – and Especially Those Who Fear Him (v7-11)

⁷ *Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre!*
⁸ *He covers the heavens with clouds;
he prepares rain for the earth;
he makes grass grow on the hills.*
⁹ *He gives to the beasts their food,
and to the young ravens that cry.*
¹⁰ *His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the legs of a man,*
¹¹ *but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.*

What is it that we can do for God?
Can we bring him food?
He’s the one who provides water – and grass.
He feeds the beasts – and the birds.

What about our strength and might?
War horses and soldiers do not impress him!

Rather, the LORD takes pleasure in those who *fear him*.
The LORD takes pleasure in those who *hope in his steadfast love*.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.
That’s why the first part of the stanza focuses on the creation.

It's what God said to Job.

Where were you when I formed the heavens and the earth?
Can you govern all of creation?
Why do you think that you know better than me?

When we fear the LORD, we recognize that he knows what is right and good.
When we hope in his steadfast love – his covenant faithfulness –
then we are patient – and we wait for him to make things right –
because *he has promised* – and he is faithful!

I can't even imagine the pain of what she must be going through –
the mother who lost control of her van and wound up in a freezing retention pond!
Two children died – another barely survived.
Lord, have mercy!!

What does it mean to fear God in that situation?
What does it mean to hope in his steadfast love?

A friend of mine lost his daughter in a tragic car accident when she was 11.
For him, the sovereignty of God became a comfort:
God wanted his daughter *with him*.
God is a far better father than any human father can be.
And in the midst of the grief and the pain –
our hope is that we belong to Jesus – both body and soul –
in life and in death.

Our hope is not that we get our best life now!
Our *hope* is that we belong to Jesus!

That's why he takes *pleasure* in those who fear him.
He *takes pleasure* in those who hope in his steadfast love.

God delights in you – when *you* remember why he created you!
He created you for himself.

And so the third stanza addresses Jerusalem more particularly
reminding her of her special place in his purposes:

I am just going to read the whole stanza –
so that you can hear how all these themes
are woven together in the finale:

3. ... Who Strengthens His City – and Governs All Nature – and Especially Israel (v12-20)

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 makes peace in your borders;*
he fills you with the finest of the 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 his crystals of ice 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.
¹⁹ *He declares his word to Jacob,*
his statutes and rules^[c] to Israel.
²⁰ *He has not dealt thus with any other nation;*
they do not know his rules.^[d]
Praise the LORD!

There is no such thing as American exceptionalism.
 There *is* such a thing as Israelite exceptionalism!

(Which should not be confused with *Israeli* exceptionalism –
 because the modern nation of Israel does *not* know his rules –
 and so long as they continue to reject their Messiah,
 they remain as broken olive branches on the ground.)

But God chose Jerusalem to be the place where he would make his name to dwell.
 Of course, Paul is very clear that the earthly Jerusalem is Mt. Sinai in Arabia –
 she is Hagar – and is in bondage with her children.
 But the Jerusalem above – she is free – and she is our mother! (Galatians 4)

If you identify the promises of Psalm 147 with the earthly Jerusalem,
 then you reject the apostolic teaching that these promises were made
 to the heavenly Jerusalem!

There are three basic statements in this final stanza.

Verses 13-15 speak of how God blesses his holy city –
 concluding with how God sends for his commands – how his *word* runs swiftly.
 Verse 16-18 speak of how God governs the snow and ice –
 melting them by his word and his spirit – his breath.
 And then verses 19-20 conclude with a final call to praise –
 based simply on how God has revealed his word – his statutes and rules – to Israel

¹³ *For he strengthens the bars of your gates;*

he blesses your children within you.
¹⁴ *He makes peace in your borders;*
he fills you with the finest of the wheat.
¹⁵ *He sends out his command to the earth;*
his word runs swiftly.

God's word fulfills its appointed purpose.
When God speaks – it happens.
You can *trust* the Word of the Lord.
We saw this morning that our Lord Jesus Christ is the Word of God.
The one who strengthens his city –
the one who blesses your children –
the one who makes peace in your borders –
the one who fills you with the finest of the wheat –
is the one who himself *is* the Word.

And the end of Book Five of the Psalms is very much the same sort of context
as the end of the book of Revelation:
speaking to a pilgrim people –
who are looking for a city – a Jerusalem –
that will actually endure!

We – like them – sing Psalm 147 in confidence that he will do it.
But we – like them – are entirely dependent upon *him* to do it!

And he reminds us year by year – and season by season –
of his faithfulness:

¹⁶ *He gives snow like wool;*
he scatters frost like ashes.
¹⁷ *He hurls down his crystals of ice 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.

As the years go by –
as the decades go by –
as the centuries go by –
as the millenia go by –

we continue to see God's faithfulness in his works of providence.

The cold of winter reminds us that no one can stand before him!
But then he sends out his word – he melts the ice and snow –
he makes his wind blow (his spirit goes forth) – and the waters flow.

And his faithfulness in providence – his faithfulness in renewing the seasons year after year –
reveal the faithfulness of his *word*:

¹⁹ *He declares his word to Jacob,
his statutes and rules^[c] to Israel.*

²⁰ *He has not dealt thus with any other nation;
they do not know his rules.^[d]
Praise the LORD!*

Do you ever feel a little odd singing this?

“The LORD has never done this for the nations of the world.”

And yet countless people will sing “America, the Beautiful”!

It’s one thing to pray for God’s blessing upon your country!
You should do that!!

And most of the poem, “America, the Beautiful” is just that –
a prayer for God’s blessing.

But then comes the last stanza:

“O beautiful for patriot dream that sees beyond the years
thine alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears...”

Now, if the next line was “O mother dear, Jerusalem” –
that would be appropriate.

But the next line is “America, America,” –
suggesting that the eschatological city is a uniquely *American* one.

Because it is *only* in the eschatological city that God will remove all tears!

Do you happen to know the history of the *tune* used for America, the Beautiful?

It was written ten years before the poem –

it was written by Samuel Ward to go with the 16th century text,
“O Mother Dear, Jerusalem.”

“O Mother dear, Jerusalem, when shall I come to thee?
When shall my sorrows have an end, thy joys when shall I see?...
Jerusalem, my happy home, would God I were in thee!
Would God my woes were at an end, thy joys that I might see”

You can’t help but see the contrast between the triumphalism in “America the Beautiful”
and the lament – the longing – in “O Mother Dear, Jerusalem.”

In “America the Beautiful,” the hope is that God will make America great.
In “O Mother Dear, Jerusalem,” the hope is simply in God.

If you are hoping in God in order to get *something else* besides God –
that is a hope that must in the end be disappointed.

What is your hope?

And remember what hope is:

hope is something that you long for – that you don’t have yet!

Hope is – by its very nature – eschatological –

looking toward the *end* – the future – the goal.

What is your hope?

What are you *longing* for?

What is the thing that you most *want*?

Psalm 147 tells us that the LORD takes pleasure – he delights –
in those who *hope* in his steadfast love – in his mercy – in his *hesed*.

My hope is built on *nothing less* than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.

I dare not trust the sweetest frame – but *wholly lean* on Jesus’ name!

There are many other things that you may want.

But do not set your heart on them.

For nothing else will be able to sustain your heart’s longing!

Only Christ – the solid rock – will withstand all the tests of time!

Only Christ!