

A COMMUNITY OF PRAISE

Hallelujah Psalms Series, Part #3

Psalm 147

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They scheduled me to preach on two of these Hallelujah Psalms between two worship leaders: Dan Huff and Dan Leeper. I think that was done for your sake because you and I are more like-minded in that we don't play instruments. Yet we're called here in this Psalm to praise the Lord—to sing to Him which is our focus in this series.

Let's hear God's Word together from Psalm 147:

- ¹ *Praise the Lord!*
For it is good to sing praises to our God;
for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting.
- 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;*
he casts the wicked to the ground.
- 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.
- 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 hoarfrost 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 to Israel.*
²⁰ *He has not dealt thus with any other nation;
they do not know his rules.*
Praise the Lord!

Father, may our hearts be engaged today. May we praise You more and more this week. Please let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

What do you think prompted this psalm? It was written in the time period after the exile, based on it saying God is gathering the exiles. It was a hopeless time when people were dislodged from their homes. As I was studying each phrase, I began to notice that each one is tied into a previous allusion or quote from Isaiah or Deuteronomy or Job. I chuckled to myself and thought, “It’s like plagiarism.”

But obviously it’s not. The Holy Spirit inspired this and serves to remind us that when we dwell richly on the Word of God we start “singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thanksgiving in our hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16). That’s what’s happening in this psalm. His meditations on God’s Word prompted him to write this.

But not only did he have his eye on Scripture, he also had his eyes outside on the heavens and the earth. Notice all the comments about creation. He’s enamored with what’s going on in the world: the patterns and seasons, the habits of animals, God’s provision and care. It led him to worship, realizing that God is caring for us, and he connects the two. The God Who calls us is the same God Who is the Lord of heaven and earth. As he realizes this, worship rises up within him.

This reminds us of the two ways God reveals Himself. He specifically reveals Himself to us in His Word—especially in the living Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. But He also reveals Himself generally in creation, to us and to all humanity. These come together and should lead us to praise God, to delight in Him and to draw attention to Him.

We can't miss the theme in verse one: *"Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting."* If we are to put that succinctly, praising God is a good thing. There's our theme today: praising God is a good, fitting, appropriate and right. It's a good thing, and it's what we're made to do.

The psalm draws out three causes for prayer. Picture Who God is and what He does in the world, and these three themes will stand out:

1. God is a grace-giver.
2. God is a care-giver for the whole world.
3. God is a law-giver.

In the first theme, we see that God gathers His people as outcasts. In the second theme, the Lord cares for all creation. In the third theme, the Lord gives His law to us. These are all part of the psalmist's praise, and we're going to pray that the Lord will use these themes to bring us joy and worship today.

1. God is a Grace-Giver

Beginning with God is a grace-giver, we see in verse two: *"The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel."* They come brokenhearted and He is healing them. This is the great God Who has determined the number of stars, but He also *"lifts up the humble and he casts the wicked to the ground"* (verse six).

Maybe you know people who are really good at gathering. I worked with a guy overseas who was great at this. As a big, warm-hearted man, he drew people around him. Or picture how clubs get started. Maybe you're watching the Olympics and are thinking, "I want to join a swim club." People want to gather with others around a common interest.

But God's gathering described here is not based on a common interest like swimming or karate. Rather, this is a saving act, a rescue mission. God is gathering people who are lost, drawing them to a relationship with Him. He's collecting those who are scattered and dispersed, those on the fringes.

Historically, to be an outcast is to be living in a place that is not your home. When Adam and Eve sinned against the Lord, He exiled them from the Garden. Sadly, that also happened to the people of Israel. God had warned them, during the leadership of Joshua when they first entered the Promised Land, that if they broke His covenant, He would expel them. He told them they would be exiled. He explicitly told them that if they disobeyed Him, there would be consequences. He had given them the land as a gift, yet they disobeyed Him. As a result, God's

people were displaced by the superpowers—Assyria and Babylon. They were kicked out of their homeland, but now God is bringing them back and is building up Jerusalem with people He is gathering together back in Israel.

It might be something like giving your son a car. You hand him the keys and say, “Do all the driving you want. You’ve got to pay for the gas, but drive this car.” Let’s say the next thing you know, he’s hot-rodding around town, endangering people. “Well son, don’t be surprised if I take those keys back. It’s a gift, but I can take it back.” That’s what the Lord did with the Promised Land. It was a gift, but He could also take it back. And that was their experience.

We must take seriously the reality that with gifts come expectations. God intends us to live a certain way in response to His gifts. When the children of Israel did not obey, He raised up fierce enemies who captured the city of Jerusalem. First Assyria in 722 B.C., and then Babylon in 586 B.C. It was brutal. All of Solomon’s former glory disappeared. They took all the treasures of the temple. They drove the people out of the city and into exile. Everything that had existed in the heyday of Israel was gone. We can only imagine the grief of the people who lived in exile for 70 years.

They remembered Jerusalem and especially the temple where God dwelled. But it was difficult to remember the *shekinah* glory of God in the temple—the place of sacrifice, where their sins were forgiven. It was the city of the king, where they had been ruled by a gracious Lord. It was the place of worship where they gathered before God and where He dealt among them. But all this was missing during their years of exile.

Imagine today’s refugees from Syria seeing pictures of their now fallen cities. Think of the grief and sadness they feel. It will probably never be restored in their lifetime. But think how much harder it was to lose Jerusalem—the place where God met His people. It wasn’t just the land—they lost the presence of God.

Their exile brought the people added shame, knowing they deserved it because their parents had lost the land due to their corruption. They had disregarded the poor and had worshipped idols. But now the Lord is bringing them back and is healing their wounds and broken hearts.

This is a great image, thinking about God’s ability to restore beauty out of ashes as He brings His people back to their land. Verse six says, “*The Lord lifts up the humble,*” but it also says, “*He casts the wicked to the ground.*” They experienced God’s judgment on sin. Yet they humbled themselves so He now is raising them up. When they humbly came back to the Lord, admitting their sin and turning from it in repentance—recognizing Who God is—He lifts them up and calls them back by His grace. They are now a community of forgiven people.

The first group of verses come to a climax in verse five, “*Great is our Lord, and abundant in power.*” There’s no wound too great for God to fix, no barrier too high for Him. His arm is not short that He cannot rescue you, no matter your distance from Him.

Consider His abundant power. This is the God Who can number the stars and call them by name. Human science doesn’t even know how many stars there are. They estimate a hundred billion just in the Milky Way. Beyond that, we can’t know—but God does, and even more, He names them. Yet in His greatness He also rescues His people, gathering them back to Himself. This reminds us of Abraham’s experience in Genesis 15. When God wanted to show Abraham the blessing He was promising him, He brought him outside to look at the stars. “Number the stars, if you are able. So shall your offspring be” (Genesis 15:5).

So when we feel small and insignificant, we should realize that the God Who can number the stars also desires to gather us to Himself. We praise God for the baptisms here today, and we pray that He will gather to Himself. There will be people from every tribe, tongue and nation brought together (Revelation 7:9), and it’s exciting to be among them.

So why would we ever judge or look down on others in our community? We’ve all been gathered. We’ve all come broken and humbled. There is no sense that any one of us has reached a pinnacle, that we were the “cream of the crop.” We’ve all been gathered from far places and we need to humbly accept each other.

We see that God is great and abundant in power, but also verse five reminds us that “*his understanding is beyond measure.*” It’s unsearchable and beyond us. We wonder what God intended for Jerusalem. The *shekinah* glory they had once experienced was never again restored to them. What was His purpose in bringing the people back to Jerusalem? What was His ultimate plan?

This is where it went beyond their wildest imaginations. Think about this. They could never imagine a time when God would bring them to Himself through a Messiah. The temple was broken, yet He would restore it in the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. The kingdom was gone, but God would restore it through the King, Jesus Christ. The sacrificial system was broken, but God would restore it in the Person of Jesus Christ. Could they ever have imagined that was what would happen?

What would a conversation be like between a first century believer and a Roman non-believer? I once heard this described in a book I read. The Roman might say to the believer, “I hear you are religious. Religion is a good thing. But where is your temple or holy place?”

The Christian could respond, “We don’t have a temple. Jesus is our temple.”

“No temple? But where do your priests do their rituals?”

“We don’t have priests to mediate between us and God,” replies the Christian. “Jesus is our Priest.”

“No priest? Who offers sacrifices to acquire the favor of your God?”

“We don’t need a sacrifice. Jesus is our Sacrifice.”

“What kind of religion is this?” sputters the pagan.

“It’s no kind of religion at all. God has rescued us in Jesus Christ, and that’s why He’s drawing us near. Christ will build His church, one stone upon another. We come to Jesus for life, and He’s the center of our gathering.”

God is the grace-giver, gathering His people around Jesus. But we also praise God because He is our care-giver.

2. God is a Care-Giver

The Lord has a heart for all of creation. Verse seven again opens with “*Sing to the Lord.*” Then the psalmist continues:

*He covers the heavens with clouds;
he prepares rain for the earth;
he makes grass grow on the hills.
He gives to the beasts their food,
and to the young ravens that cry.
His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the legs of a man,
but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love.*

At the same time that the Lord is drawing a people for Himself from the ends of the earth, He is also providing food for the animals of creation. Notice the order of his wording. He moves from clouds to rain to growing grass to food for the animals. Perhaps the psalmist herded sheep and therefore was aware of how dependent animals are on the clouds. But this created order is meant to teach us something about our God, drawing attention to His nature as a caring Father.

I found creation to be especially enjoyable during my time as a foreigner in Morocco. My wife had made growing plants her hobby and became known for her ability to grow them. She enjoyed taking cuttings from her jade plants and giving them to others. And at times the neighbor children would pick the flowers to play with them, but we would watch as the plants always recovered after being almost trampled by these children. It became a testimony to God’s ability to restore what was broken. Plants even help keep us connected. Last week a friend sent Alicia a “selfie” of herself with a plant she had been given. “This plant makes me remember you!”

Jesus often pointed to nature in His teachings about God's care. In Luke 12:24, "*Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them.*" He went on in verse 27, "*Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.*" If God cares this way for plants and animals, how much more will our heavenly Father care for us?

There's a switch in Psalm 147:10-11, calling us to go deeper into the ways of God, asking us, "What gives God delight?" Our temptation in the created world is to be impressed with power, strength and authority. But it says God does not delight in the legs of a man. Yesterday I watched the Olympics as the fastest man in the world ran the iconic 100-yard dash. Yet this is not what delights God. I think some of the athletes understand this.

Twenty-year-old Simone Manuel became the first African-American woman to win an Olympic gold in a swimming event, the 100-meter freestyle. She was excited and deeply moved, but when a reporter approached her, all she could say was, "Glory to God! I am so blessed, and I want to be an inspiration to others." What a wonderful response. Of course, the media edited this out for later, but we who watched it live saw her exciting testimony. Here was a woman who also did not rejoice in her own abilities so much as she understood and appreciated the strength of God. Not everyone gets to win though. Allyson Felix, former Olympic record holder for the 200-meter run, hurt her ankle and wasn't able to run. But when that same reporter approached her, she said, "God comes first. I wanted to run, but I'm trusting God's plan." These women understand the created order and who they are in it.

What a great testimony in a world that is so drawn to beauty and human prowess, even thinking that these are what please God. But as the psalmist writes in verse 11, "*The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.*" Maybe you can't swim or run, but if you fear the Lord, He delights in you—and that's worth everything. Some of you may remember Tolkien saying, "The praise of the Praiseworthy is above all rewards." How quickly the praise of fans dies away when we learn to value the praise of our Father in heaven, because we fear Him and hope in His love.

Consider the description of the woman in Proverbs 31:30, "*Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.*" We also read in Proverbs 9:10 that "*the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*" Wisdom gives us the right perspective on life. The fear of the Lord allows us to live in this world with sanity, because we reverently understand that He orders our world and gives us our gifts for His purposes.

Ed Walsh said this, "What you fear controls you." For example, if I fear losing the approval of others, that controls me. When their approval controls me, who is really controlling

the decisions I make? But if I respect and fear the Lord, then I become attentive to Him and am guided by His desires and instruction.

When verse 11 talks about fearing God and hoping in His love, notice that these are not contradictory. Because I fear Him, there will be situations in my life that can be awkward or painful. Relationships may be damaged. My job might be at risk. I might even find myself in danger of persecution. But what will sustain me in these times is my hope in His eternal, steadfast, immovable love for me. “He’s holding me—I can do this and this is worth more to me than anything else. My identity is centered on Christ.”

When David Boudia won the silver in the synchronized diving event, when asked about his medal it took courage for him to say, “Hey, my identity is in Christ.” we are called to center our identity on Him. We must remember that He is the God Who cares for us in all things.

So we praise our God because He is a grace-giver Who gathers the outcasts. We also praise Him for being a care-giver Who holds us safely. And third, we praise God because He is a law-giver.

3. God is a Law-Giver

Verses 12-14 begin with “Praise the Lord” and list more of God’s benefits:

*Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem!
Praise your God, O Zion!
For he strengthens the bars of your gates;
he blesses your children within you.
He makes peace in your borders;
he fills you with the finest of the wheat.*

In verse 15 we see, “*He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.*” He then returns to talking about creation: “*He gives snow like wool; he scatters hoarfrost like ashes. He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs; who can stand before his cold?*” Then back to His word:

*He sends out his word, and melts them;
he makes his wind blow and the waters flow.
He declares his word to Jacob,
his statutes and rules to Israel.
He has not dealt thus with any other nation;
they do not know his rules.
Praise the Lord!*

When we first think about the rules of God, our first response might not be worship. What children praise their parents for all the house rules? “I love you, Dad, for all these rules you

put in my life.” Blake recently said to me, “Sports don’t work without rules. The competition wouldn’t mean anything, because there wouldn’t be a way to measure what happened.”

Or imagine a government without rules—and they do exist. That leads to corruption or oppression or tyranny. Without righteous rules, people suffer. Or consider the weather. Without the rules of nature, the world would be in chaos. Just as one example, there are seasons which are important to replenish the earth. Our world makes sense because there are rules. So rules are good, and God’s rules are perfect. What chafes us is our desire for freedom, forgetting that in reality we’re not free. We’re enslaved to sin and selfishness. If our society gave sinful and selfish people the freedom to do as they pleased, it would result in a destructive downward spiral. God rescues us when He gives us His rules.

Think of the perspective of the psalmist in Psalm 119 as he thinks about God’s rules. Beginning in verse seven he says:

*I will praise you with an upright heart,
when I learn your righteous rules...
How can a young man keep his way pure?
By guarding it according to your word.
With my whole heart I seek you;
let me not wander from your commandments!
I have stored up your word in my heart,
that I might not sin against you.*

So God’s rules and His Word are our protection. When Psalm 147:12 talks about God strengthening the bars of their gates, it speaks of His desire to create security. A man without self-control is like a city without walls. God’s rules also bless our children and families (verse 13), bringing peace to our borders and filling us with the finest wheat (verse 14). These are wonderful images.

Yet there are harsh conditions as well. Verse 17 tells us that God “*hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs; who can stand before his cold?*” But according to this text, God uses hardships to correct us, causing us to be dependent on Him. Then after the correction, His Word comes to melt them (verse 18), then we experience His healing grace. Picture your heart like a bucket of ice on a cold winter day. God continues to break the ice, softening your heart. His law comes, convicting and correcting, but the result is that you find His rules to be delightful. It’s not that the rules save you—that is accomplished by faith. But His Word shapes you into community and makes you attractive to Him. He is pleased when you reflect Him to the world.

No other community has these rules except the church. We need to ask ourselves: are we delighting in Jesus? Are we delighting in His Word? Are we delighting in His direction and correction? Do we use His Word as a mirror to show us our sin? Are we able to confess our sins

to one another as He reveals them to us? Are we growing together into the likeness of Christ? When these processes take place, we become God's representatives to the nations who have not seen His beauty or His bounty.

So let's praise God for His grace in gathering us outcasts to Jesus, our Prophet, Priest and King. Let's praise Him as the God Who manages the seasons, who feeds the animals and who also cares for us. As Jesus said in Luke 12:32, "*Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*" And finally, we praise God because He changes us through His Word, growing us to be like Christ, so we might become the people He wants us to be, reflecting Him on the earth.

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