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What Can I Do but Praise?

Psalm 147

2010 Summer Psalms Series

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You know it's easy in life to lose perspective, especially when we get into the busyness of work and life and family. And you know we're about to enter *that season*—I mean we're kind of anticipating at our house getting back into some better routines, maybe from what we've had over the summer. But in the middle of all that busyness and all that activity—the activities of our life—we can kind of get lost sometimes. We can lose our way. We can lose perspective of what's important. And probably most importantly, we can lose perspective on who is God and where is He? Is He at all interested or involved in our life?

Speaking of losing perspective, last fall my youngest boy turned six and I thought it was time to take him to his first Husker game. So, knowing that he's a very, very intense little guy, especially when you get in a competitive environment, he can just kind of lose all perspective. When he's in a competition or there's a game going on, I mean it's intense and he feels it intensely and he gets really, really into it! I mean he can really lose sight of the bigger picture. So I picked a game that we were sure to win. I picked Iowa State. (Laughter) Needless to say Sam became extremely agitated during the course of this game. He's mad; he's yelling. He's saying things like, "We stink!"—which produced a lot of "Amen's!" going on around us at the time. But it got really intense and he's mad and he's kicking and he's angry, and I'm like, if we weren't forty-five people in and a hundred rows up, I'd take you out to calm you down but I don't know how to do it. Finally I bet him five dollars that we were going to win and, if we lost, I'd pay him five bucks. If we won, he'd have to pay me five bucks. That seemed to calm him down. We kind of got through the game on that. I don't know if that's a good parenting tactic or not (Laughter)—don't know if God would approve. But it worked, okay? It worked in the moment. So we got through it and I paid him my five dollars and I thought, "Wow! This was intense."

Well, lo and behold, the next week—our son goes to Baylor, works for the Baylor football team, so we took a family road trip to see Nebraska play Baylor. So I thought, "Well, this is good. Surely Nebraska will come right out and dominate this game." And sure enough we did. But now, because Sam's brother goes to Baylor and works for the Baylor football team, he is angry that Baylor is losing to Nebraska. (Laughter) He is yelling and screaming and he's angry! He's taking up a cause for his brother, and I had to take him out of the stadium and calm him down and remind him that it is just a game and that I thought Ross was really for Nebraska even though he's wearing green and he's the Baylor sideline. So we had his brother come over at halftime and say, "Yes, I'm really for Nebraska. It's all going to be okay. (Laughter) This is good." Oh my goodness! I came to the conclusion he really just wasn't ready to go to any kind of intense games like that.

I don't know which side of the genetic pool that intensity and loss of perspective comes from, but I can tell you that I oftentimes lose perspective. I get so caught up in the moment and the activity of the moment that I just lose sight of the bigger reality of life. And for me, oftentimes the question I lose sight of is what is important, my relationship with God and what God wants

and, then even, where God is. That's what I think is so powerful and dynamic about the psalms. The psalms are just those great perspective givers. Mike mentioned this morning that coming to worship and singing is part of the way we regain perspective on what's really important and who God is and where God is, as it relates to our life.

I think the psalmist this morning in Psalm 147 wants to help us gain perspective, in particular to the question, "Where is God as it relates to my life, to your life?" Does it matter to Him at all? Is He paying attention? Is he engaged with us? Psalm 147 is one of the Halleluiah Psalms—the Hallel. We mentioned several of those this summer; we've gone through them. There are three sets of five within the psalms. The last five psalms in the Psalter are these Halleluiah Psalms and they're noted because they begin and end with "Halleluiah!" They're just all-out worship psalms and each one of them focuses a little bit differently on a different aspect or characteristic of God or His activity, but is a praise and worship psalm and so that's really what its intent is.

This psalm was written after The Exile. I think most of the psalms that we've gone through this summer have been sort of post-exile psalms. We look back on God, not only having brought the people of Israel—or the Hebrew people—up out of Egypt and establishing them in the Promised Land, but then that they went through this time of judgment where they were exiled and dispersed and they were no longer really a people. But God ultimately brought them back. This psalm looks back on that event but it also speaks into the wider experience of God's intervention in activity with his people, not just that particular event.

Now it's broken into three stanzas or verses, just like songs that we sing have different choruses and verses. This psalm: Verses 1-6 are the first stanza; then verses 7-11 and then verses 12-20—those are three stanzas. And you'll notice, as we go through this, that they each begin and they end the same way. It begins with this call to praise and it gives us some insight into how that praise enlarges the vision in each one of those introductory psalms. It closes each stanza with a contrast between how God deals with His people and what other people will experience, and that's kind of how you have the bookends of each these stanzas. So let's dive into this psalm and see what we can see about the perspective we need of God's involvement with us.

Praise the LORD! (or Halleluiah!)

For it is good to sing praises to our God;

For it is pleasant and praise is becoming. (*NASB, Psalm 147: 1)

We've seen this in several of the psalms—that it is good, it's right, it's fitting to praise the Lord because of who He is. And then he expounds at the end of verse 1...**For it is pleasant and praise is becoming.** You know there's a little bit of disagreement as to whether that next phrase is talking about whether praise is pleasant and becoming, but certainly it is. It's attractive. It's becoming of us to be praising. But you'll notice some Bibles put **...He is pleasant and praise is becoming...** and I think that's probably more fitting. We saw that in a couple of the other psalms—that it really is saying God is pleasant here, or the word could be *delightful* or *beautiful*. God is delightful or beautiful and it's only fitting or becoming or attractive that we would praise one who is so delightful. And he is going to expound on why God is so delightful, so beautiful, so worthy of praise as it relates to His people.

Verse 2:

**The LORD builds up Jerusalem;
He gathers the outcasts of Israel.
He heals the brokenhearted
And binds up their wounds.
He counts the number of the stars;
He gives names to all of them.
Great is our Lord and abundant in strength;
His understanding is infinite.** (Vs. 2-5)

Now one of the interesting things in this psalm is that the psalm writer jumps back and forth between images from creation and the story of His people or involvement with His people, and they kind of go back and forth. At first glance it kind of looks like, “Okay, now why did that get stuck in there?” But as we go through this, I think you’ll see that it enlarges our picture and understanding of who God is, in the way that the psalmist is trying to help us understand God.

Here clearly the psalm writer has in mind the bringing back of God’s people out of exile. He says he *restores* Jerusalem. That word **...builds up...** means to restore or rebuild Jerusalem and **He gathers the outcasts of Israel**. What he really means is God brings back together those who have been driven away and that was certainly true of the Hebrew people. They had been driven away from their land—from the land of promise—and they were scattered all over. But here is the picture of God re-gathering them from all of those scattered places. The outcasts—those who had been driven away—He’s bringing the driven-away back together.

In addition to that, he says **...He heals the brokenhearted**. That word *brokenhearted* has to do with the falling apart of one’s life, that it’s broken into pieces. The Hebrew people were broken people. They were nothing of what they had been at one time. They weren’t experiencing the presence of God. Their lives were broken; they were a mess. But God here says, “He heals the brokenhearted”. He puts the pieces of the brokenhearted back together again and He binds up their wounds. He bandages up their sorrows and their hurts and their pains.

What’s interesting here about this language, and worthy of note, is that it’s in contrast to some of the psalms where again the psalmist is looking back at what God did. This is not written in the past tense. It doesn’t say God *healed* the brokenhearted; God *brought back* the outcasts. It says God *heals*; God *restores*; God *binds up*. And so here the psalmist is saying this is not just a one-time experience. This is part of who God is. God is the healer; God is the restorer; God is the One who binds up our wounds and brings and puts the pieces back together. This is part of the character of who God is. And these scattered ones are people that were scattered in all kinds of different countries. And clearly the idea is that God knew exactly where they were and He knew their story. He knew their brokenness and He brought them back together and He’s restoring and healing His people.

That’s where I think Verse 4 then fits in—where he jumps to this picture from creation. **He counts the number of the stars and gives names to each and every one of them**. Isn’t that interesting? I think the image here that the psalmist is trying to convey is the fact that God is intimately acquainted with all of His creation, in every person. He knows every single star that He made; He’s numbered them all. And not only that, He’s given each and every one of them a name. Now I know you think you can pay \$19.95 and name a star after yourself, but that star already has a name.

That's how detailed God is. That's how every little detail, what we look up at the sky to see—all the stars—God sees *each* star and knows its name. That's how involved God is with His creation and particularly with His people. He is personally involved with His people, and what His people need is healing and restoration and wholeness because they're broken; they're scattered; they're wounded; and God delights to be involved in this activity. This is core to His character of being the One who heals and restores, brings His people back. And so the psalmist says in Verse 5...**Great is our Lord and abundant in strength.** He's all-powerful, and **...His understanding...or His wisdom ...cannot be measured.** You can't measure the ability that God has to see each and every person and what's going on in their life and to be working to bring healing and restoration. Every star, every person, every aspect of His creation He knows intimately and He cares about deeply.

This first stanza concludes with a contrast. Verse 6:

The LORD supports the afflicted (or the lowly, the humble);
He brings down the wicked to the ground.

Here's where this contrast between the experience of God's people who humbled themselves and cried out and God brought healing and restoration to those who were humbled before Him, those who were dependent upon Him. He holds them up; He lifts up; He has us in His hands. But to the wicked—the arrogant, the proud who don't want anything to do with God—God pushes them down to the ground. God's people have a very special place in His heart.

I think this first stanza is a foreshadowing of the work of Christ on the cross. I think here in this first stanza we see the work of Jesus foretold. He's the healer; He's the restorer. It's by His death on the cross that we are healed and redeemed and restored. In fact that very language is used to describe Jesus' work in the New Testament—that He came to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim the good news of freedom—and I think that is exactly what we're seeing here. We're seeing the work of Jesus in this first stanza and the psalmist is praising this God who is the healer, the restorer, the redeemer. It's very significant for you and me to realize that God cares that much about even the smallest details of your life and you and I are his restoration project as He seeks to heal and restore and redeem what's been broken and is in pieces and wounded.

Well, the second stanza begins in verse 7, again with this call to praise Him.

Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving...I think based on what we've just said, the right response is thanksgiving—thankfulness to God that He heals, that He restores.

Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;
Sing praises to our God on the lyre, (a stringed instrument, a harp)

So here we have both voice and instrument called to be a part of thanksgiving to God for what He has done on behalf of His people. I do think it's very significant that one of the things that we do together as the people of God is: We sing. You know you don't go very many other places in the world and be a part of a group where they're singing. Singing is a part of what is unique about our worship of God. God delights in song. He delights in that kind of praise and it lifts our eyes up. It helps us to gain perspective. And here we're exhorted to do it **...with thanksgiving...**for all that God has done! In verse 8 he goes on to extol more of God and who He is.

**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.** (Vs. 8-9)

Here the entire stanza is really a picture of God's provision in creation. If you work your way backwards you have at the end of verse 9: the young ravens, crying for food. They're hungry. The raven is sort of at the end of the food chain. I mean they're the carrion that eat what's left of the beasts and all the other things that have died. And if there are no beasts, if there's nothing living, then the young raven has nothing to eat. And God hears the cry of the raven—the crow—and He has provided, beginning all the way in the grand scheme of creating the clouds that produce rain, that cause the grass to grow in the mountainsides, so the beasts can eat. So ultimately even the raven can be satisfied. You have this picture of God's grand orchestration of provision for His creation. God cares and sees and knows and feeds and provides what is needed for His creation.

I think it's so obvious that the psalmist doesn't expound on how God does that for us. I think it's just obvious that God also is our provider. If He provides for the raven, for the crow, he's our provider. He provides exactly what we need. So again, we come to the end of this stanza and we have this contrast. Verse 10:

**He does not delight (God does not delight) in the strength of the horse;
He does not take pleasure in the legs of a man.**

What he's saying here in Verse 10 is the fact that God is not impressed with all the ability that we can muster to take care of ourselves. It doesn't impress God. The one who orchestrates every single facet of His creation in order to sustain it and take care of it and make sure that everything works together isn't really all that impressed with our abilities to organize and to be strong. Here, as he relates to **...the strength of horses...** I think he's talking about military might—that armies were put together to conquer other nations to provide for themselves. So they would conquer the land if there was a drought—conquer the land that had plenty and nations fighting against nations. Military might is what I think is clearly in mind.

Or **...the legs of a man...** the human prowess or self-sufficiency, he says God doesn't delight in our self-sufficiency. God isn't impressed with our great ability to make a living and to do well in life. What does God delight in? Verse 11:

**The LORD favors those who fear Him,
Those who wait for His lovingkindness.**

Those who rely or depend or hope in God, those who understand that everything ultimately comes from God, that it's a gift from God, that He is ultimately our provider. Even the ability to do the work we do, that gives us the living we have, is from God. So ultimately God is our provider. He gives us the intelligence. He gives us the strength. He opens the doors. He makes the way for us. He is our provider and God favors or blesses or graces those who rely on His lovingkindness—those who are not self-sufficient but those who are dependent or rely upon His lovingkindness. That's who God favors.

The third stanza begins in verse 12 with again another call to praise the Lord.

Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem!
Praise your God, O Zion!
For He has strengthened the bars of your gates;
He has blessed your sons within you.
He makes peace in your borders;
He satisfies you with the finest of the wheat. (Vs. 12-14)

I think here the opening of this third stanza of this psalm is really going back to say again, “Praise the Lord for all of the things that we’ve already talked about,” first of all that God has restored you as a people to a place of strength. You are secure because God has built you up. Because you are His people, you are secure. You don’t need to fear external enemies. He’s **...strengthened the bars of your gates**. He **...makes peace in your borders**. It’s God who brings peace and security because you are His people. He also is the One who satisfies. He’s met all of our needs, which is the parallel in the end of verse 13 and the end of verse 14. **He’s blessed your sons within you**. **He satisfies you with the finest of wheat**. In other words God meets all of your needs. He’s the One who blesses you. He’s the One who provides for you. Praise Him for all that He’s done.

And now he adds yet another thing that we have to praise God for in the rest of this stanza, and this one is just a little different. Listen to the difference between the first two stanzas and this one. Verse 15:

He sends forth His command to the earth;
His word runs very swiftly.
He gives snow like wool;
He scatters the frost like ashes.
He casts forth His ice as fragments;
Who can stand before His cold? (Vs.15-17)

Here is this incredible picture of God ordering His creation to create winter and all the very facets of it—for the **snow** that he says spreads out over the earth like a blanket, to the **frost** that scatters like ashes across the hillsides, to the **ice** or sleet or hail that comes down like sprinkling crumbs. When God speaks, His creation obeys. Just instantaneously God accomplishes what He wants to accomplish in creation. He is the Lord. He is in command of creation. And it says **...Who can stand before His cold?** I mean who can stand before a God who can command creation in such a way?

But notice now the contrast, not a similarity, but a contrast with His people beginning in verse 18:

He sends forth His word and melts them;
He causes His wind to blow and the waters to flow.

So here again he’s talking about God. When He speaks He can make the ice melt and the spring come and the water flow. But notice the difference now in verse 19:

He declares His words to Jacob,
His statutes and His ordinances to Israel.
He has not dealt thus with any nation;

And as for His ordinances, they have not known them.

Praise the LORD! (Vs. 19-20)

Here we have a very distinct contrast between the way God commands creation—just makes an order and it happens—and how God interacts or communicates with His people. He doesn't command us in that way. He speaks to us. He gives us His laws, His ordinances. He invites us in relationship to listen to Him, to hear His words. He makes Himself known to us. He directs us in the path of life. He makes sure that we understand and know by His revelation to us—to His people—where we should go and what the path of life looks like. But it isn't just a command and we're not robots. We're not like the clouds, like the ice, like the snow. We are a distinct people that God communicates with in a very different way.

It's interesting how we, as God's people, can observe even the things in creation and really hear God speaking to us in it. Probably the highlight for our entire family this summer was a night we spent at a friend's cabin, east of here, along the Platte River, on a lake. We were all out on a pontoon boat, just sort of cruising around and there was a very interesting-looking cloud that began to appear on the horizon. It kind of grew bigger and bigger and a debate broke out on the boat as to whether or not it was coming our way or going another way. It was seven to one, no problem; the rain's not going to come; the storm is not going to hit here; it's going a different way. I happened to be the lone voice that said, "No, that's coming our way." I was also the driver so we headed into the dock. And we no sooner got to the dock than it broke loose. For more than an hour this storm raged; it pummeled; it hailed; it blew. The lightning and the thunder was absolutely awesome. I mean my next career is going to be as a storm chaser. I love storms. This was beautiful. This was awesome and we just sat and watched. It was a little bit of a hint, maybe, what it's like to be in a hurricane, because it just went on and on and on. I mean sixty to seventy mile an hour winds for more than forty-five minutes. It just went on. And then as the storm slowly moved down the lake to the southeast, we went out on the dock. The clouds were just rumbling and it was just absolutely beautiful. And then the sun came out, and for forty-five minutes there was a double rainbow from horizon to horizon, perfectly centered over the lake. It was a spectacular moment for us. I mean it was just as though God were speaking to us. God was saying, "I'm here. Look at what I can do."

I wondered and thought, "Do people who don't know God, do people who don't really understand that God wants to communicate with us, God wants to reveal himself to us, do they see this as anything or do they just think, 'Wow, that's one big storm, you know' "? But to me it was personal. It was God showing Himself and speaking. But He speaks to us in His word. He speaks to us in the psalms. He wants us to know and understand His heart. It's so unique about what God wants for His people, as opposed to any other nation, any other people. And even His own creation, we alone are invited in to listen and hear God's heart He's revealed it to us. He's given it to us so we can understand Him and have a relationship with Him and that is something to praise God for.

Not only did the people of Israel need this encouragement—to know that God is very much active and present among them, healing them, restoring them, building them up, making them secure, but they also needed to understand and praise God for the fact that He was their provider, that ultimately He was going to take care of them. He was going to give them what they needed. They need not fear or worry or take matters into their own hands or, out of some sense of panic, be frantically running around through life trying to make it all work in their own human effort—because God could be trusted. He was involved with them. He cared about them. He was their provider. And then for this magnificent final truth in this psalm: God commands the entire universe

and every particle and atom does exactly what he wants it to do, when He wants it to do it. To his people He speaks, invites; He calls; He reveals. He explains Himself to His people.

I think we have a picture here in this psalm of the work of the Son and the Father and Spirit. The Son is the restorer, the redeemer that we see in stanza one. God the Father is the provider. We see it in stanza two. He's constantly promised to provide for His people. And in stanza three I think we see the work of the Spirit—to reveal who God is, to speak to us, to direct our steps, our paths. Father, Son and Spirit—personally, wholly engaged and present to His people, not just on Sundays when the people of God are gathered, not just in the psalms of praise, but Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday. Not just in our devotional time when we sit for a few minutes at the beginning of the day and open up the Scriptures and read and pray, but all through the day God is present. He's active. He's working. He's engaged. He knows you and me, and His restoration and healing in us continues. His speaking is continuing to us all day long and, if we could tune into that, if we could appreciate that, then I think we will be just like the people who originally got this psalm. We will be praising God. We'll say, "Halleluiah! Halleluiah! There is no one like our God. Halleluiah! What can we do but praise a God who is so intimately and personally involved in the lives of His people?"

For those here this morning who perhaps are disconnected from God, perhaps you have no relationship with God, you've never come to a place of saying, "Jesus, I need You," that moment of decision for you—of understanding how much God loves you and how He wants to redeem you and restore you and provide for you—maybe here this morning. Now when you trust Him, you become one of His people, and all the things that are said in this psalm that are true of God and how He relates to His people, you will experience. It will be true in your life.

For those of us who are the people of God, it's easy to lose perspective, isn't it, to get so caught up in activity? Maybe we wouldn't lose all perspective at a football game—although some of us might—but we can lose perspective in the middle of all that's going on in our families. We can lose perspective in the middle of our work life. We can lose perspective in the middle of our particular struggle or pain or suffering or need. We can lose perspective. We can feel alone. But the reality is this: God is there. He's involved every single step of the way. You can count on it. And there's only one response: Halleluiah! Praise God! He is there!

Our Father, we are so thankful that this is true of You, that whether we feel it or not, it is true. Thank You for restoring and healing us. Thank You for putting the pieces of our broken lives back together as You did for the nation of Israel. Thank You, God, for being our provider. Ultimately everything is a gift from Your Hand. Thank You. God, thank You so much that You want to communicate from Your heart to our heart. You want us to know You and understand You and to see the path of life that You point the way to so that our lives could be something beautiful, just as Your creation is awesome and beautiful. Give us ears to listen and hear, for You have not revealed Yourself to any other people as You have to us. Help us to listen and respond. We say together this morning together as we close in song, "Halleluiah! Halleluiah! Praise the Lord". Amen.

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