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## THE GOD OF GRACE AND GREATNESS

Psalm 147

By

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November 22, 2009

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November 22, 2009  
Psalms 2008-09, Lesson 41

The God of Grace and Greatness  
Psalm 147

Helen Keller, who was born blind and deaf, said (*Reader's Digest*, Jan., 1983), "I have always thought it would be a blessing if each person could be blind and deaf for a few days during his early adult life. Darkness would make him appreciate sight; silence would teach him the joys of sound."

A major reason that we are so prone to complaining rather than thanksgiving is that we do not recognize our true condition before God. Like the lukewarm Laodicean church, we forget that in God's sight we are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked (Rev. 3:17). The truth is, we are dependent on God to form the clouds and bring the rain necessary to grow the crops for our food. We depend on Him to bring the winter snow and to melt it again in the springtime. We depend on Him for protection from our enemies. We even depend on Him to govern the orbits of the stars and planets, so that none crash into the earth.

Spiritually, we depend on God to come to us as outcasts and heal our hearts that are broken by sin. We depend on Him to bind up our wounds and relieve our affliction. We wait on Him to show us His lovingkindness. We are dependent on Him to reveal His word to us, telling us how to know Him and how to live.

All of these truths are revealed to us in Psalm 147, which calls us four times over (vv. 1, 7, 12, 20) to praise or sing thanks to the Lord. As I mentioned last week, Psalms 146-150 all begin and end with, "Praise the Lord." While many other psalms voice the psalmists' complaints or cries for help, Psalms 146-150 climax the Psalter with a crescendo of pure praise.

Many think that they were written after the exiles returned to the promised land from the 70-year captivity in Babylon. They may have been written specifically for celebration at the dedication of the restored walls of Jerusalem under Nehemiah. Psalm 147:2 praises the Lord for building up Jerusalem and gathering the out-

casts of Israel. Verse 13 thanks the Lord for strengthening the bars of Jerusalem's gates, which would fit with the rebuilt walls.

We read (Neh. 12:27), "Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites from all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem so that they might celebrate the dedication with gladness, with hymns of thanksgiving and with songs to the accompaniment of cymbals, harps and lyres." Similar musical instruments are mentioned in these psalms (Ps. 147:7; Ps. 150:3-5; cf. also, Neh. 12:35, 41).

In Nehemiah 9:6, the Levites prayed, "You alone are the Lord. You have made the heavens, the heaven of heavens with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them and the heavenly host bows down before You." As we saw, Psalm 146:6 extols God as the maker of heaven and earth, and the sea and all that is in them. Psalm 147 repeatedly praises God for controlling all of creation, including the stars (vv. 4, 8-9, 16-18). Psalm 148:2 calls on the angels to bow before the Lord (as in Neh. 9:6).

The same prayer by the Levites says (Neh. 9:13), "Then You came down on Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven; You gave them just ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments." Psalm 147:19 also praises God for giving Israel His statutes and ordinances.

If these psalms were written for the celebration after the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, as seems likely, we need to keep in mind that this was not a quick process. True, under Nehemiah's brilliant leadership, the walls and gates were rebuilt in an amazing 52 days (Neh. 6:15). But the process of restoring the Jews to the land had begun in 538 B.C. under Zerubbabel. Due to opposition, the few that returned were unable to complete the rebuilding of the temple until 516 B.C. Then, in 458 B.C., Ezra led a second return to the land, followed by Nehemiah in 445. So the restoration of the Jews to the land and the completion of the protective walls and gates around Jerusalem took over 90 years.

I point this out because so often, we're in such a hurry that if God doesn't do things on our timetable, we get frustrated and discouraged. It only takes a few minutes to read through this psalm

that describes how God builds Jerusalem, gathers the outcasts, heals the brokenhearted, judges the wicked, and blesses the nation with peace. But in reading it over so quickly, we often forget that the psalm describes the culmination of years and even generations of prayers and labors. So as we pray and labor for revival and spiritual reformation in our country, for the completion of the Great Commission, or even for the salvation of our loved ones, we need to keep this perspective. God is not always in the hurry that we are in! His timing is not always in line with our timing.

Psalm 147 falls into three stanzas (1-6; 7-11; 12-20), each beginning with a call to praise, followed by the reasons for praise. In each stanza, there are repeated cycles that emphasize God's goodness toward His chosen people as seen in His grace (2-3, 6, 10-14, 19-20) and His greatness over all creation on their behalf (4-5, 8-9, 15-18). Each stanza ends with a contrast: first (v. 6), between the afflicted, whom the Lord supports, and the wicked, whom He brings down; second (vv. 10-11), between the Lord's displeasure toward those who trust in their own strength, versus His pleasure in those who fear Him and wait for His love; finally (vv. 19-20), between Israel, which has received God's word, and other nations, which have not. To summarize, Psalm 147 exhorts us,

Praise the Lord for His grace toward His chosen people and  
His greatness over His creation on our behalf.

1. Praise the Lord for His grace to the afflicted and His greatness in governing the universe (147:1-6).

There are the two themes of God's goodness as seen in His grace and in His greatness over creation:

A. Praise the Lord for His grace to the afflicted (147:1-3, 6).

"Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant and praise is becoming. The Lord builds up Jerusalem; He gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.... The Lord supports the afflicted; He brings down the wicked to the ground."

Verse 1 draws from three other verses in the Psalms: Psalm 92:1 states, "It is good to give thanks to the Lord and to sing praises to Your name, O Most High." Psalm 135:3 says, "Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good; sing praise to His name, for it is

lovely." Psalm 33:1 tells us, "Praise is becoming to the upright." So singing God's praise is good, pleasant, and becoming. Sam Storms writes (<http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/article/lord-of-the-stars-healer-of-hearts-psalm-147/>), "Don't be afraid to enjoy God. Singing and celebrating the supremacy of Yahweh is 'good' and 'pleasant' and 'fitting,' if for no other reason than that is what we were created to do. *Fish swim in the water, birds fly in the air, and the redeemed revel in God!*"

The psalmist asserts that praise is becoming. Have you ever been around someone who is a habitual grumbler? He or she may be physically attractive, but his dour face makes him less attractive. Conversely, some people may not be naturally handsome or beautiful, but their joyous countenance makes them attractive. Praise *is* becoming!

The phrase, "the Lord builds up Jerusalem" is parallel to Jesus' assertion (Matt. 16:18), "I will build My church." He rebuilt Jerusalem through the labors and skill of godly leaders, such as Ezra and Nehemiah. But they were just the instruments in His hands. The Lord built Jerusalem again after the repeated sins that led to its destruction. He did it because He promised that He would do it. He rebuilt Jerusalem because of His grace, so that His people would be a center of praise to His name. That's why Christ is building His church, so that we would praise and glorify Him.

The theme of His grace is seen in the way the psalmist describes those whom God used to rebuild the city: outcasts (v. 2), brokenhearted (v. 3), wounded (v. 3), and afflicted (v. 6). When the Savior came, He read from Isaiah 61 (Luke 4:18), "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed . . ." Poor, captive, blind, oppressed! It sounds like the same crowd mentioned in our psalm! The apostle Paul described the Corinthians in similar terms (1 Cor. 1:26-29),

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the

world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God.

So the full list from these three texts says that the ones God chooses to pour out His grace on are outcasts, brokenhearted, wounded, afflicted, poor, captive, blind, oppressed, foolish, weak, base, despised, and, to top the list, they "are not"! He chooses and uses such people so that we might not glory in ourselves, but rather, in God (1 Cor. 1:31).

That list is either a cause of stumbling for you or a source of great hope. If you think that you're good enough to get into heaven by your own merit or works, it is a cause of stumbling. Your pride will keep you from receiving God's healing touch. If you continue in such pride, you place yourself in those described as the wicked, whom God will bring down to the ground (v. 6).

But, if you acknowledge that your sins have left you as an outcast, brokenhearted, and needing salvation from God's judgment, then these verses are a source of great hope! It was not the proud Pharisee who went home justified, but rather the broken tax collector, who cried out (Luke 18:13), "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" Come to Him as a sinner, pleading for mercy, and He will heal your weary soul.

B. Praise the Lord for His greatness in governing the universe (147:4-5).

Right in the middle of talking about God healing the brokenhearted and binding up their wounds, the psalmist interjects (vv. 4-5), "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." The abruptness catches our attention. The connection seems to be, if it seems impossible for God to gather and restore the outcasts of Israel from the captivity, then look at God's great power in governing the stars. If He can count them and name them all, which points to His authority over them, then certainly He can care for His oppressed people. In verse 4, the Lord counts the stars, but in verse 5, literally, you cannot count His understanding. It is beyond measure. The psalmist borrows here from Isaiah 40:26-29, which has a similar train of thought:

Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these stars, the One who leads forth their host by number, He calls them all by name; because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power, not one of them is missing. Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord and the justice due me escapes the notice of my God"? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable. He gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power.

So the only requirement for receiving God's grace and strength is to recognize your own weakness and call out to Him. As you experience His strength in your weakness and His healing for your brokenness, you will praise Him for His grace and greatness.

2. Praise the Lord for His greatness in providing for His creation and His grace to those that fear Him and hope in His love (147:7-11).

After the call to praise, we again we see the themes of God's grace and greatness, but they are reversed from the first stanza:

- A. Praise the Lord for His greatness in providing for His creation (147:7-9).

"Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; sing praises to our God on the lyre, 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."

Note that things that most people would attribute to natural processes or to "Mother Nature," the psalmist attributes to Father God. *God* is directly involved in making the clouds, sending rain, causing grass to grow, and feeding the animals. Even baby ravens, which have a raucous cry and are hardly attractive, are the objects of His tender care. Last Monday, Marla and I spent my day off riding our bikes along the West Rim of the Grand Canyon. We saw a herd of elk feeding on the grass and we saw numerous ravens soaring on the updrafts above the canyon walls. What we were seeing was the Creator's care for His creation. Jesus applied it to us (Luke 12:24), "Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; they

have no storeroom nor barn, and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds!"

- B. Praise the Lord for His grace to those that fear Him and hope in His love (147:10-11).

The psalmist continues (v. 10), "He does not delight in the strength of the horse; He does not take pleasure in the legs of a man." The strength of the horse and the legs of a man refer to an army of cavalry and infantry. A king might boast in his powerful army on horseback or his foot soldiers who are strong and well-trained for battle. But God isn't impressed! What is a horse or a strong man compared to His abundant strength that controls the stars (v. 5)? Besides, any strength that a horse or a man has comes from the Lord.

Verse 11 provides the contrast: "The Lord favors those who fear Him, those who wait for His lovingkindness." The English Standard Version translates, "but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love." We need the proper balance between fearing the Lord and hoping in Him. We fear Him because of the greatness of His power and the dazzling purity of His holiness. We hope in His love, promised to us in the gospel. And the mind-boggling assertion is that if you fear the Lord and hope in His love, He takes pleasure in you!

John Piper develops this in his excellent book, *The Pleasures of God* (revised and expanded, [Multnomah], pp. 197-202). He asks why God takes pleasure in those who fear Him and hope in His love. He answers (p. 199), "Surely it is because our fear reflects the greatness of his power and our hope reflects the bounty of his grace." In other words, when we fear His great power and hope in His great love, we glorify Him.

Thus the psalmist has said, "Praise the Lord for His grace to the afflicted and His greatness in governing the universe" (147:1-6). "Praise Him for His greatness in providing for His creation and His grace to those that fear Him and hope in His love (147:7-11).

3. Praise the Lord for His grace and greatness in providing for the physical and spiritual welfare of His chosen people (147:12-20).

- A. The Lord's grace and greatness provide for the physical welfare of His chosen people (147:12-18).

"Jerusalem," "Zion" (v. 12), and "Jacob" (v. 19) refer to God's chosen people, Israel. God was their God (v. 12) because He loved them and chose Zion for His dwelling place (Ps. 132:13; Mal. 1:2). Here the psalmist extols God for strengthening Jerusalem's gates (her security from enemies), blessing their children, giving them peace, and giving them the finest of the wheat.

He also mentions snow, frost, ice, and cold, which Jerusalem only rarely experiences. Psalm 68:14 mentions a victory that God brought about when "it was snowing in Zalmon" (a place of uncertain identity, but the Lord brought a rare snowstorm to rout the enemy). The Lord who can send bitter cold and ice also "sends forth His word and melts them" (v. 18). God is in control of the forces of nature, which He not only created, but also actively governs on behalf of His people.

- B. The Lord's grace and greatness provide for the spiritual welfare of His chosen people (147:19-20).

The last two verses provide a contrast between Israel, which had received God's words, statutes, and ordinances (see Rom. 3:2), and other nations, which had not. This leads to a final exhortation, "Praise the Lord." These verses serve as a climax to the entire psalm. Of all God's blessings, none are greater than the fact that God has chosen to reveal Himself to us through His written word. Without God's written revelation, the Bible, we could only speculate about who God is, how we can know Him, who we are, what is our purpose on earth, and how we can have our sins forgiven.

Don't take for granted the fact that you have a Bible in your native language, plus many Bible study helps. When I was in Nepal, many of the brothers I spoke to only had a Bible in Nepali, which was not their mother tongue, and no study helps at all! We are blessed by God's grace!

## Conclusion

Although she was not a professing Christian, the late "Dear Abby" reflected some unusual Christian perspective when she wrote, "Our Blessings Still Flow" (Universal Press Syndicate, 1980):

On this Thanksgiving Day, take a few minutes to think about what you have to be thankful for.

How's your health? Not so good? Well, thank God you've lived this long. A lot of people haven't. You're hurting? Thousands—maybe millions—are hurting more.

If you awakened this morning and were able to hear the birds sing, use your vocal chords to utter human sounds, walk to the breakfast table on two good legs and read the newspaper with two good eyes, praise the Lord! A lot of people couldn't.

How's your pocketbook? Thin? Well, most of the world is a lot poorer. No pensions. No Welfare. No food stamps. No Social Security. In fact, one third of the people in the world will go to bed hungry tonight.

Are you lonely? The way to have a friend is to be one. If nobody calls you, call someone. Go out of your way to do something nice for somebody.

Are you concerned about your country's future? Hooray! Our system has been saved by such concern. Concern for honesty in government, concern for peace, and concern for fair play under the law.

Freedom rings! Look and listen. You can still worship at the church of your choice, cast a secret ballot, and even criticize your government without fearing a knock on the head or a knock on the door at midnight! And if you want to live under a different system, you are free to go.

If we add to Abby's thoughts the greatest fact of all, that "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8), and that He offers pardon for sin and eternal life as a free gift, we have every reason to praise and thank the God of grace and greatness!

"Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant and praise is becoming.... Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; sing praises to our God on the lyre.... Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion! ... Praise the Lord!" (147:1, 7, 12, 20).

## Application Questions

1. Some say that Christians are not to view themselves as sinners. In light of Rev. 3:16-17, what will be the result of this view?
2. Some might say that it is unscientific and primitive to think that God controls the rain or makes the grass grow. Why is it important to affirm that He actually does these things?
3. Where is the biblical balance between fearing God and hoping in His love? How can we know when we're in balance?
4. Some think of God's moral laws as a burden rather than a blessing. Why are His commandments a blessing? Why should we view them as such? (See 1 John 5:3; Deut. 4:40; 5:29; 6:24.)

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