

A Song To The Lord

Series: Patterns For Prayer

by Steve Zeisler

This past Wednesday was one of those days that I probably will remember a long time, especially its beginning. When the dock radio went off and awakened me, immediately I heard the news coming over the airwaves that the ground war in the Persian Gulf, which was feared to be the "mother of all battles," protracted, bitter, and destructive to both the allies and the Iraqis, might already be over, after only a few days. The loss of life among allied troops was unbelievably small compared to all expectations, and even General Schwarzkopf twice called it miraculous in his press conference. At the same time I heard that, I realized I was also listening to something pattering on the skylight in our bedroom. It had been a long time since I'd heard anything quite like that, but sure enough, a serious rainfall was taking place. Waking up to both the end of the war and the beginning of the rain was a remarkable experience. As I got up I was thinking, what a God we serve! Sometimes when I pray in the morning it's a matter of routine; I pray because I am reminded that it's proper to do so. But this Wednesday my prayers came unbidden, thanking God for his goodness.

Praises in song

I'd ask you to turn with me now to Psalm 147. Perhaps the rain that has fallen and the events that have taken place since last Wednesday have captured you as well. It's good for us as Christian men and women to be able to recognize the control, power, and authority of God in the weather and in warfare, and to be able to give voice to them in prayers such as Psalm 147. This is a wonderful song of praise. I would urge you to think in terms of music as we study this psalm. This is a song to the Lord, and it is filled with the poetry that good music should have. We can imagine the most beautiful of tunes and accompaniment to this psalm that expresses for us some of the things that have taken place in our world. There are three stanzas in this psalm, verses 1-6 verses 7-11, and verses 12-20. Let's read the first stanza:

Praise the Lord.
How good it is to sing praises to -- our God,
how pleasant and fitting to praise him!
The Lord builds up Jerusalem;
he gathers the exiles of Israel.
He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.
He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name.
Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit.
The Lord sustains the humble but casts the wicked to the ground.
The center stanza, verses 7-11:
Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; make music to our God on the harp.
He covers the sky with clouds;
he supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills.
He provides food for the cattle and for the young ravens when they call.
His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his delight in the legs of a man;
the Lord delights in those who fear him,
who put their hope in his unfailing love.

War and Water

Let me make a few comments in passing about this section (to which we will return as we study the psalm in its order). Both war and rainfall are gathered together here in the second stanza of our song.

A horse in ancient times was a source of power in battle. horsedrawn chariots gave military victory as M--1

tanks do today. Verses 10 and 11 here declare that our God is not impressed at all with human military power. His attention is given to those who count on his love to sustain them. And it is he who calls the clouds into place and brings the rain that softens the earth, causes grass to grow on the hills, and so on.

The events of the days we live in should grant us, as believing people, wisdom and depth in our prayers

We hear commentary on every side today about what public policy ought to be in times of drought. We ought to build more canals, ration water more aggressively, seed the clouds as they go by, float icebergs down from Alaska, or do something. It's up to us to take matters in hand and solve the problem. And we get caught up with warfare, being captivated with the technology, attentive to points of strategy. But things like the human capabilities to wage war and to invent public policy for the distribution of water are not the focus of the psalms. That is not what ought to capture us in prayer. We ought to see the hand of God giving us water. We ought to see a God who is much greater than any military machine, who cares not so much for the powerful, but for those who need him, who hope in him, fear him and place their faith in him. The events of the days we live in should grant us, as believing people, wisdom and depth in our prayers.

Continuing now, the last stanza, verses 12-20:

**Extol & e Lord, O Jerusalem; praise your God,
O Zion, for he strengthens the bars of your gates
and blesses your people within you.
He grants peace to your borders and satisfies you with the finest of wheat.
He sends his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.
He spreads the snow like wooland scatters the frost like ashes.
He hurls down his hail like pebbles.
Who can withstand his icy blast?
He sends his word and melts them;he stirs up his breezes, and the waters flow.
He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel.
He has done this for no other nation;
they do not know his laws.
Praise the Lord**

Let's go back and examine in more detail the first stanza of this wonderful prayer. In verse 1 we're called on to praise the Lord, to sing his praises. We've talked in previous sessions together about the importance of thoughtful praise, of taking the time to think through in depth what we would say to God about himself and his world. In this psalm a nuance that is new is the calling to put our praises to music, to sing them, to make the beauty that music adds part of our world of praise.

Verse 2 notes that the Lord builds up Jerusalem and gathers exiles together. Now, we'll find a number of references throughout this psalm to Israel and its history, to the city of Jerusalem, to the hill of Zion, to the land with its borders secured by God, to the children of Israel, a nation that is in covenant relationship with God, given promises specifically to them regarding their future. And we need to understand that these are promises God will keep, that he will someday humble his people enough so that they can receive his grace and become a beacon to those around them, a channel of blessing to all the nations, serving Jesus the Messiah who will reign on earth from Jerusalem. These are promises that will yet have fulfillment.

Learning lessons from Israel

In addition, these promises teach us something about the Christian life in this age. They tell us truths about our spiritual life. They are promises that are made not only for a nation in the future, but also for a spiritual kingdom that exists at this very moment. So it is appropriate for us,

when we read verse 2 and hear of the God who gathers exiles, to recognize that he gathers exiles in this day and age as well. He deliberately seeks out and draws to himself those who are alone, rejected, cut off, imprisoned, enslaved, and inwardly without identity, passport, or home. Note that the exiles do not take the initiative to find God; we do not set off on a journey to find our way home to him, finally stumbling in and

being welcomed. The gospel message is that our Lord comes and seeks us.

Verse 3 says that he heals broken hearts and binds up wounds. We've seen much of wounds graphically depicted as the war has devastated Iraqi soldiers and civilians alike. Scars and maimings are the result of this kind of devastation of a nation and its people. Yet we must imagine God caring for people who are wounded and scarred both physically and spiritually, who have past histories of hurt. He is there with bandage, salve, medicine, or an embrace, to take the ugliness of our past, the deformity, the bruises, the cuts and give us health and life again. Those are things that are behind us, yet they have extended themselves into our present, so he ministers to them, binds them up.

And it says he not only deals with wounds from the past, but he deals with broken hearts as he gathers hurting exiles together. A broken heart is a heart that can no longer hope for the next day; it has given up any hope of the future. The Lord God himself pours his hope into their hearts. This is a magnificent image of his gathering the outcasts into a place of security and drawing them together with one another into his presence.

Numbering stars

Verse 4 is remarkable for the utter change of perspective that it brings. The God of the MASH unit, so to speak, who cares for the wounded and needy from battle, now becomes the God of the most distant heavens. He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. Now, ancient people who lived in smog-free environments, standing out on the desert looking at the heavens, knew there were a lot of stars. If you define even the smallest patch of the heavens and stare at it for very long, more and more stars become visible as their light penetrates your eyes. Trying to count the stars in even a tiny patch of the heavens would lead you to an extraordinary number. The psalmist knew he was speaking of something overwhelming to imagine God counting the stars. And how much more does a statement like this strike us in this modern era, when we know even better with our technology that the numbers of stars, the breadth of the universe, is beyond describing.

When I first-- encountered astronomy in school at a young age, I had a teacher who was trying to show the relative sizes of the sun and planets in our solar system. She had a giant beach ball representing the sun in one hand and a little marble representing the earth in the other. I was sitting there trying to imagine, if you could open up the beach ball and drop marbles in, how many marbles would it take to fill it up. I found myself dazzled at the immensity of the numbers we were dealing with. I've since heard Christian and non-- christian scientists trying to talk about the size of the galaxy. The magnificent Milky Way has billions of stars in it and extends an extraordinary reach. Its size defies language. How many billions of stars are there in the Milky Way? Then of course this galaxy is only one among perhaps billions of galaxies that all have billions of stars in them. What the psalmist is saying is that the Lord God counts every one of them.

Not only does God determine their numbers, having in mind the extent of these things, but he names them all. In ancient Hebrew thought, to give a name to something meant to invest enough time to understand it, to know its intricacies and its peculiarities. People named their child something that was particularly appropriate to him or her. When we see an individual's name changed in scripture, it is because some part of their nature has been changed. So Abram, exalted father, becomes Abraham, father of a multitude; and Simon becomes Peter, a rock. What we're saying here is that the Lord God, the one who binds wounds, heals broken hearts, and gathers lonely exiles has the breadth, size, and immensity to number, study, know, and name every single star in its particular beauty in the heavens. What an absolutely extraordinary declaration! What a change in perspective from verse 3 to verse 4. And what a reach of declaration! Such descriptions call out to be sung as an anthem. The God of intimacy is also the extraordinary God who transcends the heavens that are beyond our ability to describe. How can we begin to declare both except in song?

Verses 5 and 6 restate the point: "Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit. The Lord sustains the humble but casts the wicked to the ground." Let's take verse 5 for a moment and think about how often we encounter great understanding and great power in the same individual. We rarely run into it. Those who are really wise, understanding, and penetrating in their thinking are often people who have suffered through hardship, who have experienced powerlessness in order to be made wise. On the other hand, people who have a great deal of power and personal authority, large armies and funds, who have their every whim

met at a moment's notice, typically are not very understanding or wise. To encounter both qualities together is a wonderful thing, isn't it? We see infinite power and infinite understanding in our Lord God.

Sustaining the humble

In addition to the combination of his power and understanding, in verse 6 we have his concern for the humble, his love for the ordinary person, his particular delight in sustaining the man or woman of need, casting down the wicked and embracing and raising up the humble. I was reading an article in the newspaper yesterday that talked about job hunting and the awful times people have when they're out of work. It makes us feel powerless and humbled, doesn't it? We hope to impress somebody who might hire us, and that is a circumstance in which someone holds power over us and our future. We feel particularly humble and wonder about our value in that circumstance. The article talked about how people therefore write resumes that try to confuse the person doing the hiring into believing the best possible things about them. They try to sound terrific. The article called this "resume-speak." Resume-speak would write a line about the individual like "set up employee management dialogs." The reality is he was yelled at repeatedly by the boss. Resume-speak would say the individual is quality-oriented. In reality he is a slow worker. Resume-speak would say thorough; in reality, he has to do everything twice. Resume Speak: implemented office reorganization. Reality: moved some desks. Resume-speak: sets long-term goals. Reality: never finishes anything. It goes on showing people's attempts to say things about themselves that will confuse the person in power into thinking that they're better than they are.

But the declaration of this psalm is that the one who is infinite in power is also infinite in understanding. He is not impressed by our efforts to make ourselves look better. He requires no resume-speak in order to still love us. He loves the humble and sustains the ordinary. The fact that we have foibles and inadequacies does not drive him from us for a moment. Power, understanding, and love for the humble all fit together in him.

Musical instruments

The second stanza begins in verse 7, which we've already looked at briefly. "Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; make music to our God on the harp." Verse 1 says it is good to sing praises to our God. Now in verse 7 we find instruments added to the song. It is good to sing praises to the Lord with thanksgiving and to make music to God on the harp. The glory of this prayer set to music is filling out. We have seen Glenn in his music ministry here develop a growing choir and orchestra and encourage musicians to become active in the same way the psalm calls forth these things.

Verse 8 speaks of weather, and as I've already said, verses 10 and 11 speak of war. Our God controls them both, and haven't we seen testimony to that this week! Another point I'd make is that it is the details of this stanza that help us hear and delight in what we're being told. This is a good poet whose work we're reading here. Look at verse 8, for instance. He wants to talk about the Lord of weather, the God who brings rain. Now he might have just made the technical announcement that God causes rain to fall, but he doesn't. He wants us to first imagine looking out at the ocean in the west and seeing clouds rolling in. If you were longing for rain this week, the first time you saw the clouds darkening and headed toward the area, there was a wonderful sense of anticipation, wasn't there? We get a progressive image of what's happening here, and God is bringing it all about. First he gathers the clouds, then he covers the sky with them, then supplies the earth with rain, and finally makes the grass grow on the hills. You've had the experience, if you've lived in this area very long, of knowing what happens to the brown hills to our west the first time the rain falls. One of my favorite things around here is to look up Oregon Expressway near our house, when week after week the hills have been brown, and all of a sudden they're green! We're intended to be captured by the details and to praise God as a result of them.

God glories and delights in those who have chosen to fear and respect him, those who put their hope in his unfailing love

The grass that's grown becomes the food he provides for the cattle. And then, extraordinarily, he provides for the young ravens when they call. This word describes a bird that was abandoned by its mother at a particularly early age. The kind of bird he's thinking of is the most needy of birds, the one that's most endangered because

its own mother is poor at providing for it-- yet God cares for it. This is another beautiful detail.

He speaks of horses, and we've already mentioned that the horsedrawn chariot was a military invention frightening to ancient people who first began on foot. And then he talks about the legs of a man. God doesn't take particular delight in the legs of a man. Your leg has the strongest muscles in your body, and it suggests human strength. Artwork that comes to us from the period of the ancient Assyrians always show their warriors with outsized legs, large and rippling muscles, as a way of bragging about their ferociousness. David is saying here that the God who provides rain does not gloat in anything greater than the young ravens he cares for, the cattle, or the beauty of the hills; the God who is greater than warfare doesn't take particular delight in chariots, horses, or human strength. He glories and delights in those who have chosen to fear and respect him, those who put their hope in his unfailing love.

Energetic singing

Verse 12 begins the third and final stanza of this poem. If you have a New American Standard Bible or one of several other translations, you will see the word "praise" twice. "Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem, praise your God, O Zion." But that's a bit misleading. There are two different Hebrew words translated "praise" in verse 12. The first one is not the ordinary, most commonly encountered word for praise in Hebrew, hallel. It is the word translated "extol" in the New International Version. It has in mind praise or glorying in God with the added nuance of noise and energy. This is loud praise. What we're finding added to the song as it gets fuller and fuller is first music, then instruments, and now energy, volume, and enthusiasm. We're to praise the Lord energetically!

"Extol the Lord, O Jerusalem, praise God, O Zion, for he strengthens the bars of your gates and blesses your people within you. He grants peace to your borders and satisfies you with the finest of wheat." Jerusalem is first described as a city that welcomes exiles (v.2): bedraggled, hurting, needy, broken souls being ushered in from other places. Now the city is a place of refuge. The borders are secure, and the bars are in place. It's a place where community has developed, where food is plentiful. We can imagine this community feasting together. It's a home. The picture grows better and better as we look at it.

Verse 15 speaks of the word of God. This final stanza is mostly about the God who declares himself, who teaches us, who doesn't just act, but who describes his actions so that we can understand them and think with him. "He sends his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly. He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes. He hurls down his hail like pebbles. Who can withstand his icy blasts" Now we should recognize that here again the psalmist is using figurative language to talk about something that human beings experience. We know what it is like to have a strong north wind blow when we aren't clothed very warmly and feel the icy blast of winter. But this figure also speaks of those times in our lives when unexpected hardship comes. Trees and other plants become dormant and lifeless in the winter. There is no bud, no sap running in them. They must wait for the winter to end before life can spring forth.

The figure here is about when hardship and difficulty come upon us like icy blasts, when the hail falls on us. Then we need the word of God to make sense of it. Hardship is no accident; it is his command that brings the icy blasts and snow- the periods of dormancy, lifelessness, and difficulty in our experience. If we don't know the word of God, we will think that life's hardships and its benefits are both capricious that there's no rhyme or reason for them. But it's the word of God that tells us specifically that difficulties are called into being by God so that, as in verse 18, he can send his warm breezes to melt them, and his word so life will flow again. Difficulties come precisely so that we can receive with gratitude the corresponding warmth and hope from his hand, so that we can make good use of the life that comes after the winter. We serve a Sovereign who knows exactly what he's doing, who is concerned for us and understands us. We can know all that because the word of God teaches it to us. Therefore, we can appreciate what he does as it's happening.

Our brother vasily shared this morning about the 45 years of Romaian winter in which the communists dominated and darkened the experience of those people. He also described the experience of Romanian spring: God sent has the warm breeze to blow so that the ice is beginning to melt. Revival is beginning to take place. Western Europe and America have been sending Christian gospel messengers abroad in this century, but it may well be that what was once communist Eastern Europe, which has suffered and learned, lived through the

winter, and now sees the spring, that assumes Christian leadership and influence in the next generation.

Recipients of a gift

Verses 19 and 20 clarify what this last stanza has been saying. "He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws. Praise the Lord." He has revealed his word to his covenant people. We have received from his hand the truth that others do not have. This is not an announcement of arrogance; it is not saying we're special and others are losers. This is an announcement of humble acceptance of a gift. We are humbled that we should be given such a thing when others are missing it; our contemporaries do not know what God has said, what he's doing, or why, and for them life is a series of cary-- quilt experiences that have no coherence. That others should live like that and we should be given the benefit of his truth is an extraordinary blessing. The psalm ends: O praise the Lord! O hallelujah!

This is a wonderful prayer. It is a prayer that is deliberately calling forth music. It begins in verse 1 saying that we should sing praises. It adds instruments in verse 7, and it adds energy in verse 12. It speaks of one who calls exiles back to himself. It reminds us that we serve a God who rules both weather and war and yet ministers to the humble. It reminds us of the importance of the word of God, the clear thinking he's given us so that we can take on life as we experience it and pin him in what he's doing. It's a wonderful experience of learning to pray as we hear this psalm teach us.

Let me close by going back to verse 1. It tells us that three things are true when we sing praises to God. First it is good to sing praises to God; that is, it is proper or exactly fitting what you were made for. Secondly, it is pleasant. It is delightful, joyful; it is what makes life worth living and wonderful to experience. To sing the praises of God is not only proper but also thrilling! Lastly, it is becoming; it makes us attractive. It makes us the kind of people that others want to be around. It gives us the bloom and beauty that we all hope to have. Singing the praises of God with as much music, breadth, and energy as we can is what this psalm commands to us. May we heed its call.

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