

Praise the Saviour and the Creator

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Lunchtime Bible Talk. It's good to see you on such a beautiful day. And we're continuing the series we started last week on the last five psalms. The Praise Psalms, the Hallel Psalms, Psalms which all begin and end with the words Praise the Lord.

And indeed the whole collection begins with these words Praise the Lord. And so we're going to begin by reading our psalm for today which is on page 525. Psalm 147.

And the psalmist says, Praise the Lord for it is good to sing praises to our God. For it is pleasant and a song of praise is fishing. The Lord builds up Jerusalem. He gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars. He gives to all of them their names. Great is our Lord and abundant in power.

His understanding is beyond measure. The Lord lifts up the humble. He casts the wicked to the ground. Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving.

[1 : 17] Make melody to our God and the lyre. 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 a horse nor his pleasure in the legs of a man. The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him. In those who hope in his steadfast love.

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. He sends out his command to the earth. His word runs swiftly. He gives snow like wool.

He scatters frost like ashes. He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs. Who can stand before his cold? He sends out his word and melts them.

[2 : 18] 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 nations.

They do not know his rules. Praise the Lord. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Let's have a moment of prayer together.

Father, we thank you for those psalmists. Some of them known. Some of them unknown. Who praised you in their day. And who have given us words to help us to praise you.

Thank you for this psalm. And for its anonymous author. And pray that as we listen to these words together. As we study them. As we reflect on them.

That you will indeed build into our lives. An attitude of praise. That praise may become a lifestyle. Praise may become a choice. And that even in times of difficulty.

[3 : 20] And despair. That we may still hold on to you. And to your faithfulness. And your covenant love. We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen. A man persuaded his friend to read some of the works of Shakespeare.

Now, having tried that with various people, including my own son, it's not an easy task, I have to say to you. But anyway, the friend did go and he read some of the great plays.

He read Hamlet and Macbeth and King Lear and Midsummer Night's Dream and these sorts of things. And after a few months, his friend said to him, what do you think of Shakespeare? I said, I don't think very much of him.

It's just full of quotations. That's wonderful. Full of quotations. Now, when you read a psalm like Psalm 147 or many of the later psalms, you might well feel they are full of quotations.

[4 : 25] If you look at the reference Bible, you'll find that many of these words are echoing earlier words of the psalmists. Echoing earlier passages. Indeed, echoing other parts.

Or being echoed, perhaps, by other parts of the Old Testament. That's exactly what we would expect. Because this book, Book of Psalms, is the compendium of Israel's praise. The heartbeat of their faith, if you like. This is how they express their deepest feelings about God, about the world, about themselves, about history, and about the future. So, it's not surprising we find big themes picked up and played again. Just as in any large piece of music, you'll find tunes and themes and motifs, which are played and played again. And often come together in the great melodies towards the end of the work. And in particular, this psalm is taking the two biggest themes of all. God is the Savior. [5 : 27] God is the Creator. Now, these belong together. They're not actually really separate. Although, you can divide. I mean, God the Savior is his activity in history, if you like.

God the Creator is work in making the physical universe. And ourselves, and all the creatures. Nevertheless, they both are about life from death. And those of you who were here last week may remember in Psalm 146, the reason given for praising God was that he was the Creator, was that he was eternal. Not like other great figures whose influence stops with their death. So, they're both about life from death.

They're both about strength in the present and hope for the future. And as this psalter draws to its close, we would expect lots of quotations, if you like.

[6 : 26] Now, they're not just quotations in the sense of the psalmist showing off saying, I can quote lots of verses from the psalms. They're woven into the whole fabric of this psalm.

Probably written after the exile, when God's people returned from Babylon. Verse 2, the Lord builds up Jerusalem. He gathers the outcasts of Israel.

Or if not written after the exile, write some of the great prophets like Isaiah looking to the exile and beyond. Because the prophets, especially Isaiah, see the exodus, the return from Babylon, as both a new creation and a new exodus.

God brings the people back from the death of Babylon. He creates his people again, as he had done at the exodus. And the psalm begins with this note in verse 1.

It is good to sing praises to our God. And good, now don't water down this word. The psalms are saying it's nice to sing praises to our God.

[7 : 33] But sometimes we use the word good in a very vague sense. Whereas in the Bible, the word good is always associated with God's creation. Something that is good is something or someone that God has made it to be, fulfilling their purposes.

God saw everything he made in Genesis 1. It was good and very good and so on. So when it's saying it's good to sing, it means that when we praise God, we are doing what God made us to do. It's pleasant. It's, or the note says at the bottom, it's beautiful. I don't think that refers to our individual voices so much as to the whole praise of God filling creation across the centuries and across the world.

And it is fitting. It's completely appropriate. Praise is liberating. So what do we praise the creator? What do we praise God for?

And first of all, in verses 2 to 6, we praise him because he saves his people. He builds up Jerusalem. He gathers the outcasts of Israel. He does this in history.

[8 : 45] The return from exile. When the city is rebuilt. And when the people once again settle in the promised land. Although that was a very downbeat experience.

If you read Ezra and Nehemiah and Haggai, you'll find the desert is not blossoming like the rose. The tribes, the nations are not flowing to Zion.

But nevertheless, it's an important step along the way. God's people have returned. But once again, notice it's not just about building.

It's not about bricks and mortar. The Lord builds up Jerusalem. He gathers the outcasts of Israel. This is the living stones in the temple of God. The new Jerusalem.

In the New Testament, Peter in particular talks about the temple of God. The living stones. The people of God. Who build up into a temple. And so in history, he renews his people.

[9 : 46] He brings them back. And that points to the time when all God's people will be gathered together in the New Jerusalem. In the New Creation. But notice how verse 3 extends that to all who need his loving care.

He heals the broken hearted. And binds up their wounds. You'll notice even in these praise sounds. It's not kind of silly. Oh, you ought to be praising God.

Not the kind of silly thing I've said. If you really praise the Lord, you won't be subject to worry. You won't be depressed. And so on. That is frankly claptrap.

That does not correspond to experience. And it's a dangerous and damaging thing to say. Say to somebody who is really suffering.

Really struggling. If you trusted the Lord, you would feel better. That is cruel. And insensitive. And that's not what this psalm is saying.

[10:46] This psalm is telling, even in the midst of praise, there are still breaking hearts. There are still wounded people. But notice verse 4. He determines the number of the stars.

He gives them all their names. A wonderful way these verses are put together. And if your heart is broken, he cares. Look up at the galaxies.

The ones we can see. And of course, the far vaster number we can't see. He knows all about them as well. And this is a problem, doesn't it? If he is so great.

If he made heaven and earth. If he is the one who works everything according to the purpose of his will. How can he possibly care for a tiny planet circling a minor star in a remote galaxy on the edge of the Milky Way?

That's a big problem, isn't it? And that's a problem the Sermists are aware of. Isaiah is aware of. Job is aware of. And the answer is it's not he is too great to care.

[11:54] It's that he is too great to fail. He is too great to let us down. Now, I'm sure we all know people who are very, very happy to hobnob with the good and the great, to name drop and so on.

They're not the sort of person you'd ever go to if you had a personal problem and were really hurting. God is not like that. God is great, not just in the world of the universe, the world of the galaxies and the spiral nebulae and the black holes and so on.

He is great in the world of everyday life. And the stars, of course, recall also his promise to Abraham. Your descendants will be like the stars. You see how it fits in with the outcasts of Israel and gathering Jerusalem again.

Because when Israel were taken to Babylon, it seems that the promise to Abraham had failed, that God's people were back again. And that wonderful line to get at the beginning of the Bible, he also made the stars a kind of throwaway line, almost as if it were a kind of minor activity.

So there is no galaxy too big, no human problem too small. If it matters to you, it matters to him.

[13:16] The big picture and the final details and the finer details, these all matter to him. He is the saving God in history and in everyday life.

Now, the second reason is he is the provider. Verses 7 to 11, God provides. And notice again, this begins with a call to praise. Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving.

Make melody to our God on the lyre or whatever other instrument you may have to make melody on. Indeed, in Psalm 150, the whole orchestra is going to be summoned to praise the Lord in heaven and in earth, pointing, as I say, to that psalm.

And he turns, if you like, now to the present creation, the dynamic processes of nature. He covers the heavens with clouds. He prepares rain for the earth.

Well, we know an awful lot about that in this part of the world, although it's wonderful, this kind of weather. Is it not? And it's reminding us that the cycle of the seasons isn't just the product of secondary.

[14:22] Of course, there are secondary causes that are built into creation. But the creator himself plans it. Ultimately, he is in control. He cares for the animal world.

And he is in everything and with every part of his creation.

The kind of thing that Job, that he says to Job in chapters 38 and 39 of that book. He takes Job on a tour of the whole of the created order from the stars above the Sheol underworld, and then takes him on a tour of the animal world.

And so, he provides. And he's not dependent on human achievement to provide. Horses, his delight is not in the strength of the horse.

Now, if you love horses, don't worry. That's not what this verse is saying. In the Old Testament, horses are often a symbol of military power. Moses warns in Deuteronomy that if you get a king, he'll multiply horses.

[15 : 31] There's horses there referring to military hardware. And this is what began to happen to Solomon in his later years when he ceased to have his faith in the Lord. So, he's saying he doesn't depend on the legs of a man.

That doesn't mean you're not to run a marathon. Of course, it's not. No one will be surprised to know that I don't run marathons. My son does regularly, though.

And it's not saying that at all. What it is saying is that the power of the horse and the swiftness of the runner, God is not dependent on these to provide.

He's not overall by human achievement. But what does impress him? Verse 11, the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love, in those who realize that in their own efforts, whether it's running marathons, their own brains, their own achievements, or whether it's building up military, commercial, economic power, we can't make it on our own. Those who realize that they need the Lord to guide them, those who fear him, remember to fear the Lord, which is common throughout particularly the poetry books of the Old Testament.

[16 : 51] To fear is, first of all, to have a sense of reverence, sense of awe, sense of mystery. It also means to obey him and to those who hope in his steadfast love.

Once again, you see the realism of this hope in his steadfast love. In other words, there are tough times when it's difficult to persevere, when it's difficult to keep on going, when it's difficult to believe in his steadfast love.

So he provides. Behind everything there is, the Lord will provide. We're not so conscious of this, I suppose, in our 21st century Western world.

But, I mean, things are provided for us very much at second hand. You go to the supermarket, you go to the shops, and you get your food. To a community like the community from which the Sermist speaks, it's far more a business of people living much closer to nature.

People depending on the weather more than we do. My goodness, if we get bad weather, it's always at the top of the news. I mean, the other nations just laugh at us.

[18 : 00] When there's a fall of snow, it instantly pushes prime ministers, president, referendums, and all the rest of it off the news. But the point is, those who live much closer to the natural world are more conscious of this.

But the fact that we give thanks for our food shows that we realize, although we went and bought it at Sainsbury's or somewhere else, that it is the Lord who provided it.

So he saves, he provides. And finally, verses 12 to 20, the connecting thread here is that he speaks. Verses 15, verse 18, and 19, it is his speaking that runs through creation.

Remember, at the very beginning, creation came into being as God spoke. God said, let there be light, and there was light. Once again, this begins with a description of praise, verse 12.

Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem. Praise your God, O Zion. Jerusalem, Zion, like Jacob, Israel, run through the Bible. Jerusalem, the literal city.

[19 : 06] Zion, the people of God. And so on. And both are true. And creation is dynamic because God's word is dynamic.

Remember, creation isn't just something that happened in the beginning. Creation is happening at this moment. That's why we are breathing. That's why we are alive.

Because the creator is sustaining us at this moment. And he rebuilds. He strengthens the bars of your gates. Once again, Jerusalem, after the exile, does much more than that.

He blesses your children within you. This is the future. The future of peace and prosperity. Once again, this is looking ultimately to the new creation.

And I'll say a bit more about this when we come to Psalm 150. We know very well that many people are not blessed in this way. There is famine.

[20 : 08] There is death as well as blessing. But the psalmist is basically saying that God's purpose is to bless. Again, a creation passage very reminiscent of Job.

A poetic passage. His word runs swiftly. He gives snow like wool. He scatters frost like ashes. And he hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs.

Who can stand before his cold? That is a very poetic, beautiful way of looking at it. I mean, after all, humanity makes ice cubes. God makes snowflakes.

Which are all different, aren't they? Creation, beautiful, different, and varied. And then he sends out his word and melts them. He makes his wind blow. Wind and spirit are the same word.

When God speaks and his spirit utters, then the ice disappears and the wind melts it. But he also, and this is the final verses, he establishes relationships.

[21 : 12] He declares his word to Jacob. His statutes and rules to Israel. No, you mean we're back to rules and regulations now.

Now, the point about rules is, this is not petty rules. These are the kind of rules which we need in order to live decent lives.

After all, if you're trying to find somewhere in a strange town, you want a map that will be accurate, which tells you where to turn left, not at this street, but at the next street, and so on.

It's more that sort of thing, the kind of rules which enable us to carry out our lives successfully and to do what we want to do. He, to Israel, he has not dealt thus with any other nation.

Now, the point, of course, is not that he doesn't care for other nations. And once again, we remember Abraham. Abraham, Genesis 12, God says, Abraham is to be blessed in order that all the nations are to be blessed.

[22 : 20] This blessing is not... And when you read the Bible, you see how God begins, begins on a huge canvas. He creates heaven and earth. Then he comes down to Eden.

And then humanity expands over the face of the earth, largely wiped out at the flood, but then once again, growing in number, huge numbers.

Then once again, he narrows down to one individual, to Abraham. Abraham. And, and on and on throughout Scripture, until the salvation of the world depends on a baby in a stall.

That's the, that's how God works. But from that, flows the blessing to the whole world. So you see, when it says, they do not know his rules, the word know in the Bible is much more the, doesn't mean they can't recite the Ten Commandments.

What it means is, they don't have a relationship with him. So it's, it's ultimately about relationship. Rules are necessary. We couldn't live properly without them.

[23 : 29] But ultimately, it's about relationship. So, I'm afraid, the psalm is full of quotations, but it is consistent with the whole story of God's consistent faithfulness.

And that's ultimately what this psalm is about. God is faithful. That's an absolute statement. Not that he's sometimes faithful. Not even on the whole, God is faithful.

But absolutely, at all times and in all places to all eternity, God is faithful. And that's the message of Psalm 147. And as we, and as we reflect on that, let's pray for a moment.

Lord, we praise you for your faithfulness. We are fickle. We, we blow hot and cold. We cannot, so often, keep faith consistently.

And yet we remember, ultimately, the story depends not on our faith, but on your faithfulness. And so help us to respond to that with love and with trust and with obedience.

[24 : 45] Amen. And so we sing the hymn on the sheet, Great is thy faithfulness, O God, my Father. So may the Lord bless us and keep us.

The Lord make his face to shine upon us and be gracious to us. The Lord lift up his countenance upon us and give us peace and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be with us now and forever.

Amen. Amen. Amen.