

CHURCH IMPROVEMENT: BUILDING A CHURCH THAT HONORS GOD AND LOVES PEOPLE THROUGH EXALTING IN GOD ALONE

Psalm 147:1-20

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

Describe an occasion when you shouted or exclaimed or sang out of joy, happiness, amazement, etc. What was it about this particular occasion that caused you to use your voice to express your joy? Do you often express your delight or joy in people or events or things audibly? Why or why not?

This psalm contains four commands to praise God (vv. 1, 7, 12 & 20). Two of these commands tell us that this praise is to be sung and accompanied by musical instruments. You will also notice in three of them that the command is directed to a group, not to individuals (“our” God, “our” God, Jerusalem and Mt. Zion). Here we find commanded that the people of God gather together on a regular basis to sing their praise to him and to play music to him in thanksgiving. The bulk of the Psalm is taken up with giving the reasons why God’s people find God and singing praise to God so pleasant. The psalmist aims to remind and convince us of God’s greatness so that we will spontaneously and joyously gather with others to sing praise to him. In this study we will seek to discover with our minds God’s greatness so that we delight in him in our hearts so that we express our joy in him in song together.

STUDY

1. In verse 1 the psalmist says the singing praise is good, pleasant and fitting. What do each of these words tell us about singing praise to God?

When God says praise is good, he means that it is morally right (cf. Gen. 2:9 & 17, same Hebrew word for good). It is immoral to not

praise God in song. People who do not gather with others to sing praises to God are sinning, they are doing evil rather than doing good. When God says that playing music to the Lord is pleasant, he means that it is joyful. Praising God in song is full of pleasure for God’s people. Praise is full of pleasure for Christians because God is delightful or valuable to them. C.S. Lewis says about praise, “...all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise... The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside... The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about... we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.”

Finally, when he says it is fitting he means that praise in song “fits” the people of God the way a glove fits a hand, the way that hunting fits a gun or sewing fits a sewing machine or water fits a fish or marriage fits a man and woman in love. Singing praise is what the people of God are made to do. It is as natural for the people of God to gather together to sing praise to him as it is for Packer fans to watch the game. It is as unnatural for Christians to not gather together to sing praise as it is for people who love ice fishing to live in Florida from November through March.

2. According to vv. 2-3 what is God doing that ought to inspire praise?

When the psalmist says that the Lord builds Jerusalem, he is telling us that the Lord is building the church. When he says that he is gathering the exiles of Israel he is referring to his work of gathering all of his people out of all the nations of the world into the church. When he gathers them, he heals the brokenhearted and binds their wounds.

3. “Exiles” in the NIV is literally, “those who were banished” and refers to all the Israelites who were carried off into captivity by Assyria and Babylon. According to 2 Kings 17:7-23 & 2 Chronicles 36:15-21, why were the Israelites banished from the land of Israel and into captivity?

At the end of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, is recorded the destruction of Jerusalem and the banishment of the remnant of Israel into captivity in Assyria and Babylon. God’s banishment of Israel was due to their sin. They

worshipped false gods, broke God's law and refused to listen to the prophets that God sent to them time after time.

4. According to Genesis 3:21-24 with Romans 5:12-18, whom else has God banished from his presence?

Every human being, every son and daughter of Adam and Eve, has been banished from God's presence due to sin.

5. In Matthew 5:17 Jesus says he is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, i.e. the entire OT. Therefore, when we are told that God gathers those who were banished, heals their broken hearts and binds their wounds, what is this referring to?

God builds his church by gathering all the banished ones of Israel, that is, all the sinners he has determined to save by grace. When he gathers them, he heals the brokenhearted and binds their wounds. The broken hearts and wounds are the result of God's judgment against sin. This isn't just talking about people who have experienced some earthly tragedy but those who are broken hearted over their sin and wounded by their sin. Peter in his first letter says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." We are broken due to sin but Christ by his death puts us back together and assures of God's love and comforts us with his presence. God tenderly gathers out of all banished humans his chosen people, healing the hurts caused by sin and binding the wounds he afflicted for sin. He does this through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Please be sure to note that God is the one who is doing the gathering, healing and binding, not men.

6. What else do we find out about this salvation and those whom he saves from v. 6?

In verse 6, salvation is the lifting up or sustaining of the humble. Again, all those whom God gathers and heals and binds and lifts up are humble people. As humble people we recognize that it would be completely just for God to banish us from his presence forever but contrary to what we deserve he lifts us up and grants that we share in the life and victory of the eternal Son of God. Humble people are distressed by their sin, not the sins of others. We know that apart from grace we are lost. But notice, all those who are not humble, all the wicked are cast down by this same gracious God. The God

who saves by grace, also justly punishes the proud and wicked. In other words, out of all wicked, banished people, God saves those whom are humble by grace and justly destroys all who refuse to repent and remain proud in their rebellion against him.

7. What does the Psalmist tell us about God between these two descriptions of salvation (vv. 4-5)?

This God who comes near to save and comfort us poor sinners is the God who determines the number of the stars and who gives names to each one of them the way we give names to our pets. The total number of stars in the universe is unknown to human beings. The number of stars just in our Galaxy is estimated to be between 200 billion and 600 billion and there are millions of known galaxies and an untold number of unknown ones. There are stars whose diameter is greater than the distance between the center of our sun and the earth. If you were going to pick the most powerful and numerous objects in the universe, it would be stars. God knows how many stars are in the universe and he has given a name to each one like we give names to pets. It is no wonder that the psalmist says immediately upon telling us this fact about God that he is mighty in power and his understanding has no limit.

8. Why should we know this and how does it inspire praise?

The God who builds Jerusalem, who gathers the banished ones of Israel, who heals their broken hearts and binds their wounds, who lifts up the humble is the infinite and eternal God of all creation. God is to be praised because he is awesome beyond description and yet he tenderly cares for us and saves us and forgives us and restores us and comforts us. God is not mindful of us out of any need in him but simply due to his love for miserable and poor sinners like us. He is the greatest and most august of beings who has drawn near to tenderly gather, heal and bandage all his chosen, humble people.

God's people find pleasure in praising him because the God of creation has made them his people by grace.

9. In vv. 8-9 what is the reason the psalmist gives to praise God with music?

God sends the clouds to cover the sky, then he sends rain from the clouds to water the earth, then he causes the grass to grow on the hills. He does this in

order to provide food for cattle and for the fledglings of ravens that cannot fly and are squawking in their nests for food. He picks out cattle and baby ravens because cattle are valuable to men and so God aims to show us our dependence and because men rarely think about baby ravens and so God aims to show us how he cares for all of creation, not just the parts we happen to think are important.

10. Stop for a moment and carefully think about God's sending clouds and rain and making grass grow and feeding animals of all kinds. Is that how you normally think about rain and grass and baby ravens? How does it make you feel? How ought this to make us feel?

Elizabeth Barrett Browning captures this reality in a stanza from her poem, "Aurora Leigh", "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees takes off his shoes; the rest sit around it and pluck blackberries." To live with the knowledge that God is right now causing me to breath and the earth to spin on its axis and the sun to shine and the wind to blow is to live securely and joyfully. To know that he is causing the universe to work in order to support life by providing food for even the fledglings of ravens gives to life purpose and peace. This really is "My Father's World." Our hearts ought to be filled with joy and praise, as we understand that God provides all things to us.

11. Immediately, the psalmist tells us what pleases God and what does not please God. What doesn't make God happy and why do these things not please him?

First, he is not pleased with the strength of a horse, nor with the legs of a man. What does that mean? If you were going to pick a created object that was impressive to human beings at the time this psalm was written, a horse would be that object. For thousands of years, horses were those mighty animals that made the life of humans easier. Horses were indispensable in the defense of your country and in conquering other countries. They are impressive in their speed and their power, especially when directed by man for man's welfare. Even today we recognize the value of horses in that we measure the power that our car engines exert in "horsepower." The God who is able to send water thousands of miles from the oceans to the farmer's field in a gentle rain is not impressed with what a horse can do. Even less is he impressed with what a human can do. The psalmist is using "legs" as a symbol for all that humans are able to accomplish. The God who cares for and feeds the hundreds of millions of baby birds born each year and who

treats mighty stars like pets, is not impressed with your ability to read a book or fix a car engine or sew a dress or build a church building or sing songs or play instruments or preach a sermon. He is not impressed with our Bible reading or shoveling out our neighbor's driveway or sharing the gospel with out friends. He is not impressed with human achievement or ability. Would Owen Gromm or Norman Rockwell the famous artists be impressed with my attempts to draw or come to an exhibition of my artwork? Would Josh Groban or Frank Sinatra be impressed with my singing, would they come to a concert that featured me singing?

12. What does please God and why?

What makes God happy, what draws his attention is human beings who fear him and who hope in his unfailing love. What God delights in are humans who are delighted with him. When we respond to reality as it actually is, then God gets excited. We recognize that we are created beings, that we are not the cause of our own existence and that everything is a gift. We understand that the God with whom we are dealing is infinite in power and his understanding is beyond our understanding. We have not simply disobeyed our mom or some human law. We have offended the God who feeds us and who directs the course of the wind and who sends earthquakes that send tsunamis that wipe out over 150,000 people in a moment. Fear is the only rational response to these realities. We ought to tremble before him.

But also, this same fearsome God is the God who gathers the banished ones of Israel and heals our broken hearts and binds our wounds. This God has shown his love for us in creation but most clearly in the sending of his only Son to live and suffer and die for us. Therefore, we hope in his unfailing love to deliver us from his fierce anger. We don't hope in our ability to sing praises to God. We don't hope in the sincerity or length of our prayers. We don't hope in our diligence in reading the Bible. We don't hope in our working in some ministry of the church. We don't hope in our being good. We hope in the fact that God, through Christ, loves sinners like us and counts us righteous because of Christ and pledges to sustain our faith by his Holy Spirit and so bring us safely to our eternal home. When we fear God and when we hope in his love, then is God pleased in our pleasure in him.

13. What or whom do you most fear? What do you usually find hope in?

God's people find pleasure in praising him because they are impressed with God, not themselves.

14. What does God do for the church in vv. 13-14? What are ways you have seen God do this?

He makes the church secure from all harm and sends his blessing upon all who are a part of the church. The church is indestructible and all who live within its walls are watched over and provided for by God. The only safe place in the world is the church of Jesus Christ. As Jesus said in Matthew 16, he is building his church and the gates of hell will not overcome it. Though the church is surrounded by enemies without and betrayed by false Christians and false teachers within, yet God defends her. There have been many, beginning with the Jewish ruling council in Jerusalem in the months following the birth of the church 50 days after the ascension of Jesus, who have attempted to destroy the church. Yet they are all dead and the church yet stands and grows in spite of every human attempt to destroy it. In our days, communism sought to wipe the church out of existence throughout the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and China. Yet, Stalin is dead as are the dictators of the Soviet bloc countries and Chairman Mao, and the church is flourishing in those countries. In China, though the Marxists have worked for sixty years to wipe out the church, yet it is 10 times the size it was when they took over. All who dwell within the boundaries of God's kingdom on earth, the church, are fed with everything they need to live the life he has called us to live. We have received everything necessary for a life of godliness.

15. What does God's word accomplish in vv. 15-18? What is the point of telling us this?

God controls the weather by his word. He sends his commands, his word to the earth and spreads the snow like wool and scatters frost like ashes and throws down his hail like bread crumbs. Then, that we might consider the power of God's word he asks, "Who can withstand his icy blast?" No matter how much I enjoy winter and snow and being outside in the cold, I cannot live outside in the winter. Every human must at some point retreat into a shelter and seek the warmth of the fire of burning gas or oil in your furnace or of wood in your stove. Anyone who attempts to live outside in the cold without fire will die. You and I cannot withstand his icy blast. He commands the cold and snow to show us how weak and frail we are. Human work is not what is ultimate, God's word in directing all that happens is what is ultimate.

Then, in v. 18, he sends this same word to melt the snow and ice and to cause the river to flow again. The life giving water that is now locked up in snow and ice and cannot be used by plants is going to be melted in the spring when God sends his breath to melt it and cause the water to flow again. The emphasis here is on the power of God's word over all human power. We cannot stand against this word that rules over the weather. We cannot withstand the cold or tornadoes or hurricanes or hailstorms or drought. We cannot make the ice melt and the water flow.

16. What else has God done with his word in vv. 19-20 (cf. 1 Peter 1:23-25)?

This same God whose word commands the weather has revealed his word to his people. He has given his word to the church. That same power that rules the weather has been entrusted into the hands of the church. He has not given this word of revelation to any other people but only to his church. This God whose word controls the weather also has given this word that creates and sustains our life. It is this word of God that creates the church, defends the church, blesses the church and sustains the church. How we ought to prize this word personally and corporately because it is only by this word that we will continue safe in the world.

17. What do you view as more powerful, your work or God's word? How is that shown in your life?

God's people find pleasure in praising him because God's word, which rules the world, also sustains them.

EXTRA CREDIT:

How do we know that this psalm, written to "Israel, Jerusalem and Zion" can be applied directly to us, non-Jewish Christians?

- Romans 9:6-8 and 11:1-6:
- Matthew 5:17 & Luke 24:44-49:
- Revelation 21:9-14 & Ephesians 2:19-22: