



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Epiphany 5

February 4, 2024

The Lord Takes Pleasure

Psalm 147:1-11

¹ Praise the LORD! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting. ² The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. ³ He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. ⁴ He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. ⁵ Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. ⁶ The LORD lifts up the humble; he casts the wicked to the ground.

⁷ Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving; make melody to our God on the lyre! ⁸ He covers the heavens with clouds; he prepares rain for the earth; he makes grass grow on the hills. ⁹ He gives to the beasts their food, and to the young ravens that cry. ¹⁰ His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man, ¹¹ but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.

Psalm 147 is a call for God's people to praise Him. When it was written, many in Israel had just returned from 70 years of exile in Babylon, and more refugees were still returning. Some were living in tents; some were rebuilding their houses; others were repairing the city walls. Still others were rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. Imagine what it would've been like to return home after such a long period of time. And the return trip was no small matter. It was 800 miles from Babylon to Israel, and along the way, they would've faced bandits, wild animals, and pitfalls of many kinds. And yet, the psalmist enjoins them to praise the Lord.

Why? Why would they want to praise Him under such challenging conditions? Well, according to Psalm 147, they would praise Him for His mighty works on their behalf. Listen to how the psalmist describes God's exercise of power on behalf of His people:

The Lord builds. He gathers His people together. He heals and binds up. He counts the stars and calls them by name. He understands. And finally, He lifts up.

And later in the psalm, we're told that the Lord also covers the heavens with clouds. He sends rain which makes the grass grow. He gives food to man and beast alike. He grants protection to His people. He blesses their children. He provides His people with a safe place to live.

When you look at things this way, you realize that God's people have many reasons to praise Him.



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In Psalm 147, God's power is shown in what He does both in heaven and on earth. His power is seen in the universe, which He created by the word of His mouth. His power can be seen in the stars, which He flung out into space, naming each and every one! Scientists tell us said that there are more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand found on every beach and desert on earth! Oh, God is truly worthy of our praise!

But the universe isn't the only place where God's power is displayed. It's also seen right here on earth. Look at the natural phenomena like the thunderclouds and rain. Bear in mind that rain is especially critical in dry climates such as that of Palestine. The rains brought grass to the fields, which provided food for the cattle and other beasts. So, no matter how you look at it, in many and various ways, God looks after the physical needs of His creatures.

The psalmist also reminds His readers that God isn't impressed with human strength. The Summer Olympics are due to take place later this year. New records are likely to be set in all sorts of physical feats – faster, stronger, farther. It's impressive to us, but not to God.

What impresses God? It's those who fear Him, those who show respect toward Him. What impresses God, what God delights in, what He takes pleasure in, is those who put their hope in His steadfast love. The word for "steadfast love" in the Old Testament is the Hebrew word "chesed." This word carries with it the idea of a person "stooping down, like a parent stooping down to pick up and carry a child." That's exactly what God did for the people of Israel. He stooped down and carried them through the wilderness, through years of exile, and back to their homeland. Sadly, it was never very long before they forgot what He'd done for them, before they forgot to say "thank you."

It's been observed by counselors that gratitude is undeniably connected to happiness. As God's people, you and I take great comfort in knowing that when our physical strength fades, our spiritual strength carries on – undiminished. That strength of spirit is God's gracious gift to us. We receive it through His Word and Sacraments. Psalm 147 reminds us that the very same God who works so powerfully in this great universe, and who works so wonderfully on this earth, also works in your life and mine. Indeed, the place where God's power is most clearly seen is in the lives of His people. And for that, like the people of Israel so long ago, we are to thank and praise Him.

According to Psalm 147, this gracious God builds up the city of Jerusalem, a city that had been destroyed by its enemies. God is still building up His people today. By means of His Son's death and resurrection, God is building up lives destroyed by sin. He's building up lives paralyzed by despair. Through His Word and Sacraments, He's building up and strengthening His church, and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. In the days of Psalm 147, God was bringing tired exiles home from foreign lands. Today, He's bringing prodigal sons and daughters back from the "far country" of sin.



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Sin tears down, whether it's your sin or the sin someone else commits against you. Sin destroys lives, breaks hearts, crushes spirits, and separates people from God and from one another. Sin is a terribly destructive thing. It's not as harmless as you think it is, not by a long shot. Don't give in to it; don't give it space in your life.

But when you do, Psalm 147 says that God heals the brokenhearted. Today, as we submit to Him, enabled by the Holy Spirit, He brings healing. He steps into our lives when things aren't going right. He binds up the wounds caused by sin. His forgiveness overcomes conflict and alienation. As one theologian observed:

"The Gospels abound in stories of healing. Jesus makes whole and sane what is broken and insane, in body and mind. The woman who encountered Him was made whole, the demoniac who met Him was liberated... Those who are disrupted [and] disintegrated, are healed by Him.

"This power has appeared on earth, the Kingdom of God has come upon us; this is the answer Jesus gives to the Pharisees when they discuss His power of healing the possessed; this is the answer He gives to the Baptist to overcome his doubts; this is the order He gives to His disciples when He sends them to the towns of Israel.

"As you go, preach, saying, the kingdom of God is at hand. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.'

"He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on Him, and by His wounds we are healed (Is. 53:5)."¹

Beloved, as New Testament Christians, we know that God has brought us healing through the cross and the empty tomb. God's Son, Jesus Christ, brought us healing when He died for our sins. He brought us healing when He rose from the grave, overcoming death and opening wide the gates of heaven.

Our gracious God, according to this psalm, sustains the humble, but He casts the wicked to the ground. In our world, we often equate humility with weakness. But think about this: the Bible says Moses was humble, and yet Moses took on Pharaoh in the power of the Lord. Through Moses, God lifted Israel out of the pit of slavery and drowned Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. Jesus humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, yet He defeated sin, death, and the devil for us. Our security isn't found in our own strength and ability; it's found at the cross and the empty tomb. It's God who supports us when times are tough, and it's God who defeats our enemies, bringing to nothing their plans to hurt and harm us.

¹ *The New Being* by Paul Tillich, University of Nebraska Press. © 1955 by Paul Tillich.



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Psalm 147 describes the majesty of the Creator – the God who knows the stars by name, the God who controls the weather, the God whose powerful Word makes water flow and energizes the breezes. It describes the majesty of the Creator who forms the clouds and gives rain to the grass; providing food for the cattle and the raven. It makes the important point that this Creator God is not a remote and impersonal God. He brings healing and restoration to the brokenhearted – to those who fear Him and put their trust in His unfailing love. It's difficult for us to understand and appreciate a Supernatural Being so powerful, so beautiful, and so majestic, who made all things, yet at the same time loves us, to the point of sending His own Son to die for us.

Psalm 147 tells us that this God understands human beings far better than they understand themselves! In His Word, He tells us what we need. More than that, by means of His Word and Sacraments, He *gives* us what we need. By these means, He provides us with spiritual strength. This psalm shows us that those things human beings consider powerful and important are sure to let us down. It reminds us that God is both our Creator and our Redeemer. Our God is a God who cares. He's not the Great Divine Clockmaker who made the world, wound it up, and then left it to its own devices. No, our God sends rain in due season, He causes the grass to grow, and He gives food to bird and beast alike. He blesses His people. As Jesus said, "Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

Out of the billions of people in the world, God knows you by name! Your name is written on the palms of Jesus' hands through the nail-marks of the cross! Psalm 147 teaches us that the power who made the stars, who controls the snow and the frost, the wind and the waves, is the One who builds us up in Christ. He gathers us together into His church. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. As Isaiah wrote in today's Old Testament:

"Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint" (Is. 40:28-31).

Our God, beloved – through His Son, Jesus Christ – has done for us – and *continues* to do for us – what we could never do for ourselves. And *that's* why we praise Him. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen