

The psalmist is eager to call the people of God to sing praises to the God who not only heals the brokenhearted but sets the stars in place. This carefully crafted psalm is a mosaic of Old Testament texts, composed in the era of the Second Temple, when Nehemiah and Ezra led the people.¹ Psalm 147 was particularly well-suited to worship at the Feast of Tabernacles as it celebrates God's creation care and covenant blessings. The recently returned refugees from Babylon were humbled by the ordeal and grateful for the Lord's redemption. They were eager to worship Yahweh and mindful of the monumental challenge before them.

The psalm moves effortlessly from earth to heaven and from heaven to earth. The Lord who sustains the universe with his word is the same Lord who is rebuilding Jerusalem and gathering the exiles. As a creation psalm it celebrates Yahweh's sovereign control over the cosmos and all of nature. As a covenant psalm it celebrates Yahweh's gracious redemption of his people. Both realities are woven together to form a single truth and a powerful incentive to praise the Lord. Each of the three sections begins with a call to praise and then develops the weave of God's cosmic sovereignty and his covenant faithfulness. The Lord governs the stars and the seasons by his word, but even more importantly, he reveals himself personally to the descendants of Jacob. Living between the Hallelujahs means celebrating God's sovereign control over creation and covenant which are woven together under the rule of God.

Starting Over

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.*

Psalm 147:1-6

¹ Allen, Psalms, 308-309. Allen writes, "The psalm seems to be the product of an interweaving of passage with passage in almost midrashic fashion" (309). Psalm 147:2 - "outcasts" or "exiles" (Isa 56:8); Ps 147:3 - "brokenhearted" (Isa 61:1); Ps 147:4 - "stars" (Isa 40:26; Ps 147:5 - "his understanding has no limit" (Isa 40:28); Ps 147:8 - "makes grass grow on the hills" (Ps 104:14); Ps 147:9 - "young ravens" (Job 38:41); Ps 147:10 - "horse" and "warrior" (Ps 33:16-17); Ps 147:11 - "who put their hope in his unfailing love" (Isa 40:31; Ps 33:18); Ps 147:15,18 - "the word" (Ps 33:16-17); Ps 147:16-18 - "snow, frost, hail, ice" (Job 37:6-10; Isa 55:10-11).

Nehemiah's account begins with a description of the returning refugees: "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." When Nehemiah heard this report in the Persian capital of Susa a thousand miles away, he wept and prayed: "Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel" (Neh 1:3, 5-6). It is out of this struggle and the faithfulness of people like Nehemiah that Psalm 147 was sung and prayed.

A brief review of Israel's history gives depth to our understanding of Psalm 147. God called Abraham out of nowhere to make of him a great nation. Under the patriarchs, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, the family grew. Then, famine led the Israelites into four hundred years of Egyptian bondage. We remember the first Exodus when the Israelites escaped from Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and were led through the wilderness by Moses and Joshua into the Promised Land. The stories of Deborah, Gideon, and Ruth, led us to Kings Saul and David. Here, Israel is at its height. David's son Solomon begins the descent.

Salvation history becomes more complicated when the kingdom is divided between Jeroboam's Israel in the north and Rehoboam's Judah in the south. Against a litany of bad kings, Elijah and Elisha keep Israel's history alive. From there the story-line belongs to the prophets. It is hard to keep 16 prophets straight. Their ministry, from Joel to Malachi, spans 400 long years. Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah and Jeremiah tried to turn the hearts of the people to God. Embedded in their message is the story of the coming Messiah, but few grasped the promise of this messianic hope and few honored God with their obedience and devotion. God judges his people and sends them into exile. The Babylonian captivity runs for 70 years. Habakkuk, Daniel, Ezekiel, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, cover this period. This is where Nehemiah and Ezra come into the picture.

The first Exodus was powerful. God's ten plagues, the Passover meal, and the solidarity of the people of Israel leaving Egypt in mass, crossing the Red Sea on dry ground, feeding on manna in the wilderness, and receiving the Law on Mount Sinai, all add up to a spectacular defining moment. But the second Exodus from Babylon was nothing like the first. Israel trekked back to their homeland as refugees. Nehemiah and Ezra describe a beleaguered people, barely hanging on. When the temple was rebuilt, those who remembered the glory days under Solomon and the first temple, cried, because they were disappointed. Malachi's cry for faithfulness is the last word in this downward trajectory, followed by 400 years of silence. The people of God, through whom God designed to bless all the nations, was taken down to rock bottom. The descent of the Messiah was preceded by the descent of the people of God.

The post-exilic rebuilding of Jerusalem by refugees who were weak and humbled was God's way of preparing for the Messiah – the Word made flesh (John 1:14). The prophet Zechariah warned the people not to despise the day of small things (Zech 4:10). The Lord was healing the brokenhearted and binding up old wounds. He was restoring the Jewish people and reestablishing

the temple, the Mosaic law, the Passover, the sacrificial system, the priesthood, and the walls of Jerusalem. He did all of this to cradle the Incarnate One in a lowly manger. There was little room for pride of country and race, among a humbled people who were dependent upon God for mercy and justice. The believers who first prayed Psalm 147 found the Promised Land much less promising than they imagined it to be in the days of King David, but the Promised One was coming and God was building his cradle.

The Redeemer who saved this beleaguered group of refugees was also the Lord of the universe who numbered and named the stars. The people of Israel had undergone a Job-like experience brought on by years of disobedience. It would have been natural for them to think that their disgrace impinged on the Lord's greatness. The psalmist was there to remind them that it didn't and that they must not project their weakness and failure on the Lord. He who remained in control of the universe remained their faithful Redeemer – their only Savior.

The reference to the stars is of special note on two counts. First, it recalls God's covenant promise to Abraham, when the Lord said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be" (Gen 15:5). Secondly, it recalls the pagan religious practices of the Assyrians and Babylonians who prayed to the star-gods.² The psalmist reiterates the greatness of the Lord's mighty power over all of creation. He proclaims, "His understanding has no limit." The result of the psalmist's weave of creation and covenant is doxology:

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!
Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?
Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?
Romans 11:33-36*

Unfailing Love

*Sing to the Lord with grateful praise;
make music to our God on the harp.
He covers the sky with clouds;
he supplies the earth with rain and makes the 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 horses,
nor his delight in the legs of the warrior;
the Lord delights in those who fear him,
who put their hope in his unfailing love.
Psalm 147:7-11*

The exiles can sing to the Lord in grateful praise, because the Lord cares for his creation. Just as

²Wilcock, Psalms 73-150, 278.

the Lord supplied the needs of the Israelites in the wilderness, he will supply the needs of the exiles. The people can put their trust in Yahweh because he provides food for their cattle and even for the young abandoned ravens who are on their own. The Lord is not impressed by horsepower or military muscle. His delight is “in those who fear him and put their hope in his unfailing love” (Ps 147:11). The psalmist understands power differently from the world. The Lord’s redemption was not based in the kind of power they experienced in exile.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Peter was ready to fight for Jesus, but Jesus refused. ““Put your sword back in its place,’ Jesus said to him, ‘for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?’” (Matthew 26:50b-54).

Jesus in Gethsemane teaches believers how to use power. He doesn’t need his disciples fighting for him with the weapons of the world. Jesus was surprised that Peter didn’t know that he has thousands of battle ready angels at his immediate disposal. All he had to do was say the word and his Father would have sent them. The problem with angel warriors was simple: “How then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?” That is to say, “Peter, don’t you know that everything is being orchestrated by divine necessity.”

“It must happen just like this.” Martin Luther wrote, “Here then is the ground of Christ’s suffering: not because he had to, or because God could not find another way to effect his praise and glory, but in order that God might be vindicated as true to his Word which he had spoken through his prophets.”³

The Lord of the universe, the hope of the world, chose the power of redeeming love over the power of natural forces and worldly strategies. The exiles were experienced in worldly oppressive power, but Jesus was setting up a strategy of redemption that involved cruciform powerlessness. Israel’s descent into powerlessness paved the way for a virgin to conceive and give birth to a son who would be called Immanuel – God with us.

The Language of God

*Extol the Lord, Jerusalem;
praise your God, Zion.
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 wheat.
He sends his command to the earth;
his word runs swiftly.
He spreads the snow like wool
and scatters the frost like ashes.*

³ Luther, *Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, vol. 5. 380.

*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.*

Psalm 147:12-20

The only reason we are able to extol the Lord is because he has chosen to speak to us *and* because he has given human beings the ability to understand his languages. God is not silent. We have his word in creation and in covenant. God is the ultimate polyglot, speaking all the languages, all seven thousand of them, plus the more than five hundred extinct languages. God is not limited to phonology, but deploys every conceivable language to communicate. The “voices” of molecular biology, mathematics, and music, to name only three, *declare*, in their own special way, “the glory of God” (Ps 19:1).⁴

The famous English mathematician and atheist Bertrand Russell (author of *Why I Am Not a Christian*) was reportedly asked on his deathbed what he would say if he discovered that in fact there was a God. He replied, ‘I think I should say to him: Sir, it appears that my atheistic hypothesis was erroneous. Would you mind answering me one little question? Why didn’t you give us more evidence? Not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence.’⁵ Contrary to Russell the psalmist hears the voice of God everywhere. Divine revelation is the determinative factor for human understanding and human destiny.

Creation and redemption depend on the word of the Lord. The psalmist sees the powerful word of the Lord securing Jerusalem, protecting Israel’s borders, and satisfying the people with the finest wheat. He “sends his command to earth; his word runs swiftly” (Ps 147:15). The God who speaks creation into existence orders the planets and the seasons. “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible” (Heb 11:3). He sustains “all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3). The word of creation can be an intimidating word. The psalmist asks, “Who can withstand the icy blast?” He might have framed this question with any number of nature-inducing fearful scenarios from earthquakes to hurricanes. But instead, he quickly balances it out with the encouragement of fresh spring breezes and thawing streams. The word of creation lifts the human spirit.

Of all the languages of God, the one that centers them all is his revelation to Jacob. The Lord chose to reveal himself and his commands to Israel for the sake of the world. He gave his word to a small, beleaguered nation, who in their post-exilic state were humbled and keenly aware of their weakness, in order to share his redemptive love with the nations. The Jews have been

⁴ Webster, *Preaching Hebrews*, 24-25.

⁵ Timothy Johnson, *Finding God in the Questions*, 56; Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 104.

advantaged wrote the apostle Paul, because “they have been entrusted with the very words of God” (Rom 3:1). However, this advantage was not for the sake of their pride and privilege but for their sacrifice and responsibility. The author of Hebrews describes the unfolding progression of God’s word this way: “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe” (Heb 1:1-2). The ultimate climax to God’s revelation in creation and covenant came in his embodied word – the Living Word. “The word was made flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The scandal of particularity, that God chose Jacob (Israel) among all the nations, narrows down to the scandal of the cross. God himself is crucified for the sins of the world. The incarnation of God in Jesus defines God’s good news in the most specific and personal way possible: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

The ultimate convergence of God’s word in creation and covenant comes in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, the first-fruits of the new heaven and the new earth. From Genesis to Revelation, the meaning of the cross and the mystery of the atonement unfold under the sovereign direction of God. We are prepared for the cross through images, events, allusions, symbols, parables, prophecies, and poetry. Every form, phase, type, and strata of the Bible points to the cross. From the Garden of Eden to the return of the exiles, from Babylon and from the birth of Christ to the Garden of Gethsemane, we are moving toward the inevitability cross. The word of the cross is woven into the very fabric of history. And as history moved toward the cross, *creation* moves toward the Resurrection. The word of resurrection is woven into the very fabric of nature. The history of God’s revelation points to the cross and the nature of God’s creation points to the resurrection. We are prepared for the resurrection through the “big bang,” the language of DNA, the human quest for knowledge, the Periodic Table, mathematical patterns and formulas, the human capacity for beauty, the anthropic principle of the universe, the incredible complexity of the living cell, and the meaning of the human drama. Salvation is woven into the very fabric of creation and covenant.⁶

⁶ Webster, Second Thoughts, 125-126.