

PSALM 147

¹ Praise the LORD!

How good it is to sing praises to our God;
for God is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.

² The LORD builds up Jerusalem;
God gathers the outcasts of Israel.

³ The Mighty One heals the broken-hearted,
and binds up their wounds.

⁴ The Holy One determines the number of the stars,
and gives to all of them their names.

⁵ Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;
God's understanding is beyond measure.

⁶ The LORD lifts up the downtrodden;
God casts the wicked to the ground.

⁷ Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre.

⁸ God covers the heavens with clouds,
prepares rain for the earth,
makes grass grow on the hills.

⁹ The Lord gives to the animals their food,
and to the young ravens when they cry.

¹⁰ The Mighty One's delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor is the Holy One's pleasure in the speed of a runner;

¹¹ but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear God,
in those who hope in God's steadfast love.

¹² Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem!
Praise your God, O Zion!

¹³ For God strengthens the bars of your gates;
The Holy One blesses your children within you.

¹⁴ The Lord grants peace within your borders;
God fills you with the finest of wheat.

¹⁵ The Mighty One sends out commands to the earth;

¹⁶ The Lord gives snow like wool;
God scatters frost like ashes.

¹⁷ The Holy One hurls down hail like crumbs.

¹⁸ The Lord sends out a divine word, and melts them;
God makes God's wind blow, and the waters flow.

¹⁹ God declares God's word to Jacob,
God's statutes and ordinances to Israel.

Praise the LORD!

Some people believe that we should praise God no matter what's happening in our lives or in our world. Let's just focus on the good things. Just be positive and will yourself to be happy, or at least content. Others believe that praising God will bring you the tangible benefits mentioned in this psalm. The outcasts will be gathered, the community (in this case Jerusalem) will be built up, the broken hearted will be healed, the wicked punished. If you "fear God" and trust in God's "steadfast love", peace will come your way against external threats, your children will thrive and your crops will grow. A God who even names the stars, oversees the seasons and manages all creation's ebb and flow can take care of God's people. Just believe!

But I can't believe the Hebrews could buy such superficial positivity, fake praise and shallow faith. If any people knew hardship, they did. If any people had reason to doubt their God, they did. If any people had reason to complain about their situation, they did. Sure they had there wonderful moments and victories, but they also knew the agony of suffering and defeat too.

Well, isn't that the case for many of us too, even those of us in the first world with lots of benefits and privilege? Family breakdown, health breakdown, financial struggles, vocational struggle, anxiety, depression, resentment, bitterness, envy, boredom, loneliness, addiction... The struggle is real for any of us.

So then, these words from the psalmist don't come cheap. They are intended to inspire, to provoke, to challenge, to uphold, to comfort... To praise God is always a good thing no matter what's happening. If things are great, praise keeps us humble, thankful and appreciative, refusing to take things for granted and aware that things can change too as life happens. If things are not so great or we are passing through a rough patch right now for reasons clear or not so clear, praise helps us change the channel and breathe in some fresh mental and spiritual air. It helps us step out of the hole we're in to see that there is a time for everything, and even though it can sometimes feel we will be in this mess forever because we cannot see our way out right now, it will not be forever. There is this life and there is eternity and sometimes eternity infiltrates this life and lifts us up and out in ways we didn't see coming. Life can become beautiful in ways we could never have envisioned.

Pray for others. Pray for yourself. Reach out to your community. The Hebrews knew how to be a people together even when they fought. This was one of their superpowers. They didn't struggle and suffer in isolation. Their identity was as a people, not just as individuals doing life on their own. Their other superpower was a stubborn demand that God be there for them. They would not give up or give in until God blessed them somehow. Such stubborn faith and prayer opens doors of vision and perspective. We see new things and live new things because we wait and we hold on and we don't give up our faith that God's steadfast love will find us somehow as we keep trusting in it and fearing (meaning: reverencing and respecting) God and what God can yet do. We keep praying even when it's sometimes hard to believe it can make any difference.

PRAYER: We come before you, O God, with reverence, with humility, but also with boldness in our asking as you call us to do. We come before you asking to be lifted up, to be vindicated, to be blessed, to be healed. We are asking that you show us the way forward and give us the courage and the faith to follow it. We are asking that you give us the grace to engage a conflicted situation in our lives in a way where our humanity or the humanity of another is not diminished. We are asking that you help us believe we can become the hands, feet, voice and heart of Christ for others and in the world, and by so becoming, find our own fullness and peace. We are asking, O God... and we give you praise for all you make possible. Thank you for hearing our prayer. Amen.