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A Call to the Disheartened

In his book titled, *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis wrote the following:

It is for people whom we care nothing about that we demand happiness on any terms: with our friends, our lovers, our children, we are exacting and would rather see them suffer much than be happy in contemptible and estranging modes. If God is Love, He is, by definition, something more than mere kindness... [In this way] He has paid us the intolerable compliment of loving us, in the deepest, most tragic, most inexorable

sense... (Lewis, 2002, p. 569)

The point Lewis is making is that a loving God will not sit by and allow the object of His love to remain broken in sin. Because He loves us, God is committed to our refinement, our purity, our growth in holiness and so grace. Solomon likewise exhorts us this way:

Proverbs 3:11-12, "My son, do not reject the discipline of the Lord, or loathe His reproof, for whom the Lord loves He reproves, even as a father, the son in whom he delights."

If you want a loving God? A loving God is one that disciplines His children.

Hebrews 12:7, "It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline?"

Now as glorious as God's saving love is, nevertheless, it creates a huge problem for the believer! For redemption throws a monkey wrench into the natural order of creation. Recall that you and I were made to function in a world which relates to God on the basis of our works. Right? The defining element in man's relationship with God is the agreement the Lord entered into with man at the beginning of creation which said, "If you obey Me, you will live. If you rebel, you will die!" (Genesis 2:16-17)

Because of this, Christianity involves a massive struggle. Everything within us wants to relate to God on the basis of our conduct! *This is why you will never meet a non-Christian who doesn't believe that he is saved by his works!* Yet, everything in God's word calls the believer to relate to God on the basis of Christ's conduct — and so God's grace!¹

Do you see the struggle? Though we are saved, we still long to relate to God on the basis of our works! When we do this — when moralism slips into our lives — discouragement and grief are never far behind. Psalm 147 was written to address this struggle and so the tension inherent in redemption:

- (1) relating to God based on religious devotion or
- (2) relating to God based on Christ and His love!

Recall that after the exile of 586 BC when the nation, temple, city, and the lives of God's people were destroyed, the Lord brought His people back to Palestine in 538 BC. While there was some initial excitement on account of the fulfilled promises of God², it wasn't long before despair and then depression settled in. The former glory was gone! God's people now were living in uncertainty, they were vulnerable, and they were embroiled in a constant stream of conflict, suffering threats and attacks.

So, what did they do? They focused on themselves making sure that as individuals and families they survived. *Forget the temple and so the worship of God! Forget the city and its security.*

Forget our fellow brothers and sisters. As long as it is well with me and mine, we will be O.K.!

Fast forward the clock eighty years to 458 BC. Amid this sadness, despair, and rebellion, the Lord sent Nehemiah to rebuild the City Walls. That clearly is the context of the Psalm before us.

Psalm 147:2-3, “The Lord builds up Jerusalem; He gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds.”

Many maintain that the occasion for the writing of this Psalm was the rebuilding of the walls.³ And that most likely is the case considering this verse.

Psalm 147:12-14a, “Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion! For He has strengthened the bars of your gates; He has blessed your sons within you. He makes peace in your borders...”

This is exactly what occurred when the city walls were rebuilt at the time of Nehemiah. Accordingly, God’s disheartened people should take from this — the rebuilding of the city walls — incredible encouragement! Clearly God had not abandoned them! Yet far from encouragement, God’s people now had walls behind which to sulk and continue to lick their wounds!

So God gave this Psalm to His people at this time as a call for them to take their focus off themselves and so engage in their chief and most glorious purpose: To praise and delight themselves in the Lord!

The structure of this Psalm is chiasmic. There are three main sections: vv. 1-6, 7-11, 12-20. Each contain the same three elements:

- A call to praise God.
- A description of what God is/some facet of God’s character.
- A subsequent encouragement as it relates to God’s people.

Now in vv. 7-11 the order as it relates to these three elements is different from what is found in vv. 1-6 and 12-20.

- In vv. 1-6 and 12-20 the order is: A call of praise, words of encouragement based on a description of God’s character.
- In vv. 7-11 the order is: A call to praise, a description of God’s character, and then words of encouragement.
- This creates a chiasm which therefore places the emphasis of this Psalm on the middle section, vv. 7-11.

Furthermore, you will note that v. 11 is the center verse of this Psalm — which, as we'll see, is significant as it clearly is the call and so the message that God gave His disheartened people.

What is that call? It is repeated throughout the Psalm. First, we read the general call.

Psalm 147:1, 7, 12, 20b, "Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant *and* praise is becoming... 7 Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; sing praises to our God on the lyre... 12 Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion!... 20b Praise the Lord!"

What is God's call to the Disheartened? Take your eyes off yourself, your situation, your sin, and place them on God, His character, His promises, and so His plan. What an important and helpful call! More often than not discouragement is the result of unmet expectations on the earth. Right? The disheartened are seeking from life that which is found only in God! We see it in Isaiah speaking of the Servant.

Isaiah 49:4a, "But I said, "I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity..."-

After so much effort and toil, the Servant looked around and saw that all his effort was making little difference- and that is what he was about, making a difference! As such, his heart sank into discouragement! So, what was the cure? If you read further, it was for the Servant to place his focus on God!

Recall the snippet we have in the life of Asaph who spent so much time focusing on what others had and what he in Christ lacked (cf. vv. 2-14). What is it that turned him around? He gazed upon God.

Psalm 73:15-17, "If I had said, 'I will speak thus,' behold, I should have betrayed the generation of Thy children. When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God; *then* I perceived their end."

What is it that lifted Job out of his stupor in which he blamed God for the Valley in which he found himself?

Job 42:5-6, "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees Thee; therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes."

Discouragement oft-times occurs when we take our focus off of the Lord and place them on everything else! Accordingly, God's call to the disheartened is, "*Gaze upon Me! Praise Me! Grow in your understanding and vision of Me! Do that, and your life will be different!*" That is the focus of the Psalm before us!

Consider the words of the late James Montgomery Boice in this regard. Critiquing the focus of

the “Praise Song” which has and continues to be used in churches across American, he wrote in reference to a particular praise song referenced in his commentary:

What is the song about, then? If we look at it carefully, the answer is clear. With all the repeats, ‘I’ is the subject twenty-eight times. Not God, but ‘I’ myself. And not even myself along with other members of the covenant community, just ‘I’... This is narcissism, a self-absorption characteristic of our contemporary secular culture... [In contrast] Psalm 147 uses the pronoun ‘he,’ which refers to God, fourteen times and ‘LORD’ eight times. In other words, the psalm is about God, not ourselves. ‘I’ does not occur once, and ‘our’ is used just twice. (Boice, 2005, p. 1265)

The very simple answer to discouragement when it comes to life and ministry as Christians is to gaze upon and to keep your gaze upon the Lord, His character, His work, His grace, and so His ultimate plan!

In this regard, we need a little direction. God is a big topic! So is there any facet of His being that we ought to focus upon in the valley? Based on the Psalm before us, there is! Yet to show you that we first must become familiar with this Psalm. According, consider with me the content and flow of Psalm 147.

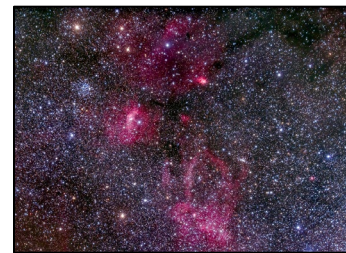
First, we should praise God in the valley on account of the expanse of God’s knowledge.

Psalm 147:1, “Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant *and* praise is becoming [fitting/appropriate].”

Why ought we to praise God? Consider the focus of the Psalmist here when it comes to God’s character.

Psalm 147:4-5, “He counts the number of the stars; He gives names to all of them. Great is our Lord, and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite.”

The focus is on the greatness of God when it comes to His knowledge. The picture shows millions upon millions of stars. And yet this is but a small area of our galaxy which sports upwards to 400 billion stars. Now if you think that is a lot, consider that our galaxy is one of over 100 billion galaxies in the universe.



How many stars must there be? It is beyond our ability to imagine! Yet did you know, according to this text, God not only has “counted them”, BUT He’s “named them”! Most certainly “God’s understanding is infinite!”

In this regard don’t miss the Psalmist’s choice of wording. God’s understanding (not His knowledge alone) is infinite! In other words, a God who has personally named the stars most certainly is intimately aware of each and every struggle we have as sinners.⁴ It is based upon this, that the Psalmist brings this to where we live. Because of the intimacy of His

understanding and so His knowledge of where we are and so what we specifically need.

Psalm 147:2-3, 6, “The Lord builds up Jerusalem; He gathers the outcasts of Israel.⁵ He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds... 6 The Lord supports the afflicted; He brings down the wicked to the ground.”

Most certainly God has NOT forgotten us! He knows exactly where we are and what we need! It is based on this that the Psalmist issued the call for God’s disillusioned and hurting people to praise the Lord! They may think that where they were was a mistake... but it most certainly wasn’t when it came to God’s Sovereign plan! Yet there is more!

We should praise God in the valley on account of the glory of creation.

Psalm 147:7, “Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; sing praises to our God on the lyre.”

Once again, the Psalmist issues forth a call to worship. Why ought we as God’s people praise the Lord in the Valley?

Psalm 147: 8-9, “Who covers the heavens with clouds, who provides rain for the earth, who makes grass to grow on the mountains. He gives to the beast its food, *and* to the young ravens which cry.”

The focus here is on the life cycle which begins with water-laden clouds which then waters the earth, causing grass to grow which is then fed upon by the beast of the field, and which in death feed the young raven when it cries.

Perhaps you have lived so long that you have stopped your wonder over the glory of God in creation. Yet let me give you a small peak at one of the elements referenced here: the fact that God “...provides rain for the earth...” (v. 8b). John Piper, commenting on Job 5:8-10- which like Psalms 147 speaks of the greatness of God in creation on account of rain, wrote the following description as to what is involved in a Palestinian rain storm for which Job gave praise.

Water will have to be carried in the sky from the Mediterranean Sea over several hundred miles, and then be poured out on the fields from the sky. Carried? How much does it weigh? Well, if one inch of rain falls on one square mile of farmland during the night, that would be 2,323,200 cubic feet of water, which is 17,377,536 gallons, which is 144,735,360 pounds of water.

That’s heavy. So how does it get up in the sky and stay up there if it’s so heavy? Well, it gets up there by evaporation. Really? That’s a nice word. What’s it mean? It means that the water stops being water for a while so it can go up and not down. I see. Then how does it get down? Well, condensation happens. What’s that? The water starts becoming water again by gathering around little dust particles between

.00001 and .0001 centimeters wide. That's small.

What about the salt? Salt? Yes, the Mediterranean Sea is saltwater. That would kill the crops. What about the salt? Well, the salt has to be taken out. Oh. So the sky picks up millions of pounds of water from the sea, takes out the salt, carries the water (or whatever it is, when it is not water) for three hundred miles, and then dumps it (now turned into water again) on the farm?

Well, it doesn't dump it. If it dumped millions of pounds of water on the farm, the wheat would be crushed. So the sky dribbles the millions of pounds of water down in little drops. And they have to be big enough to fall for one mile or so without evaporating, and small enough to keep from crushing the wheat stalks. (Piper, 2016, pp. 631-633)

God's creation most certainly is a wonder, isn't it? Have you ever considered what is involved in a sunset? How long has it been since you marveled over an eagle soaring over a canyon riding upon the thermal waves created by heat emanating from the earth? Have you ever seen a horse run in slow motion? Or how about man who is fearfully and wonderfully made? When Usain Bolt shattered the 100 meter world record how many sat in wonder over his speed? And yet, all this being said, notice the point that as great and glorious as is His creation, nevertheless:

Psalm 147:10-11, "God does not delight in the strength of the horse; He does not take pleasure in the legs of a man. [You know what the Lord favors?] The Lord favors those who fear Him, those who wait for His lovingkindness."

If you are trusting God this day, the Lord takes more delight in you than anything else He has made (including the unfallen angels)! As that is the case, let us praise the Lord in our miseries; we are the apple of His eye! And yet there is more; we should praise God in the valley on account of the power of God's word.

Psalm 147:12, "Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion!"

This is the Psalmist's third call to worship. Notice that upon which the call is based:

Psalm 147: 15-18, "He sends forth His command to the earth; His word runs very swiftly. He gives snow like wool; He scatters the frost like ashes. He casts forth His ice as fragments; who can stand before His cold? [But then...] He sends forth His word and melts them; He causes His wind to blow and the waters to flow."

Consider the passing of the seasons and, with each, the resulting weather conditions on the earth. Do you understand that each occurs as God simply speaks "a word"?! The divine fiat from Genesis of "Let there be..." continues as the Lord rules this earth!⁶

How powerful is God's word?! How mighty?! We all here believe that all God needs to do is speak a word and everything would change! Right? We don't question the power of God's word!

Psalm 147:19-20, "He declares His words to Jacob, His statutes and His ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any nation; and as for His ordinances, they have not known them. Praise the Lord!"

Just as God speaks a word and the fields turn white with snow... and then speaks another word and summer breaks out, realize that the Bible in your hands is a record of "words" that God also has spoken! Accordingly, the promises of God's word are just as sure/trustworthy as the word that issues forth from the Lord bringing summer! That is the point of the Psalmist here!

In this regard, I would direct your attention to Leviticus 26 and one of the promises God made in His word to the very people now struggling with discouragement. Moses, after detailing the horrible consequences that would occur on account of national rebellion against God — the exile, the destruction of the nation, the loss of the temple, and much more — God gave this sovereign and solemn promise:

Leviticus 26:44-45, "Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor will I so abhor them as to destroy them, breaking My covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God. But I will remember for them the covenant with their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God. I am the Lord."

God's people needed to take this promise with the same certainty as they did the divine word which causes the sun to rise in the morning. Yes, the nation was gone! Yes, the former glory all but a memory! Yet every promise that God made to His people was, has, and continues to be as certain as the sun obeying God's word to rise in the morning! That in essence is the point of this section.

Psalms 147:13-14, "For He has strengthened the bars of your gates [the implication, *'in accordance with His word!'*]; He has blessed your sons within you [*'in accordance with His word'*]. He makes peace in your borders; He satisfies you with the finest of the wheat."

In this final section, the Psalmist reminds God's people that the current blessing that God's people were experiencing at the hand of the Lord was nothing less than the fulfillment of God's word! So Christian, what else has God promised?

Rather than remaining in the gloom of despair, we must respond to the promises of God with the same certainty and assurance we have when it comes to the rising of the sun and the passing of the seasons! And with this, the Psalm ends where it began, "Praise the Lord!"

This is the content and flow of Psalm 147. It clearly is a call for the child of God to take their focus off themselves, their circumstance, their sin, and place them on the Lord! Yet again, is there any facet of His being that we ought to focus upon in the valley? Indeed, there is! Consider the specific call of Psalm 147, to rejoice in the love of God.

Psalm 147:11, “The Lord favors those who fear Him, those who wait for His lovingkindness.

The center verse has great importance when it comes to Hebrew poetry.⁷ Robert Godfrey put it this way:

One important form of Hebrew poetry is that a poem often has the critical verse or message in the middle of the poem rather than at the end. By contrast, the dramatic force and meaning of poetry in English often depends very much on the closing words of the poem... Think of [Hebrew] poetry as a pyramid (although that may not be an image that would have appealed to ancient Israel!). The poem in this image builds up to the center or top point and then descends on the other side. The center or high point is the crucial focus of the meaning of such a poem. (Godfrey, 2017, pp. 33,34)

Now, not every Psalm makes a statement via its center verse, but many do; and Psalms 147 is one of them. Verse 11 is the center verse of this Psalm!⁸ As such, we conclude that this verse contains the primary focus for which the discouraged and disheartened ought to praise God. And what is that focus?

Psalm 147:11b, “The Lord favors those who fear Him, those who wait for His lovingkindness.”-

Don't miss this incredible statement! God's blessing attends those who live with reverential awe over His love! Yet this isn't strong enough for notice the word “wait.”

The word is a “*faith*” term. Much like faith/trust, “waiting” involves relying upon the character of God. Yet unlike faith/trust “waiting” includes the element of time in its definition. God's call is to the disheartened because of their sin and the miseries of this life is to wait in time on the Love of Christ! As THE center verse of this Psalm, this is the central teaching that God gives to the disheartened!

And so the call here is to trust in God's love over time- over the long haul, in good and bad, in ease of days and in trial! If God's people had been doing this as they returned from exile, they would NOT have fallen into depression and discouragement.

That having been said, it clearly is never too late to wait on God's love; after all, God gave this exhortation years into the exile!

And so we take from this Psalm the call to view everything in our lives against the backdrop of God's redeeming love. That is what lifts our head in our discouragement! That alone is what

sustains the disheartened Christian!

With that, and in closing, I want to take everything we have learned from this Psalm and put it together; the resulting image is quite amazing! With the understanding that the Love of God for His sinning people is the thematic center of this Psalm and so the focus, consider to the praise and glory of God, the Lord knows all things, including our failings and our sin (that is the point of the first movement of this Psalm, vv. 1-6)! In this regard, consider a dirty room.

In a dim and dirty room, it is easy to think that the room is clean. It is only as the lights are turned up that we see that the room in fact is not clean. That means the room was dirty all the time; we just didn't see it!

In this regard, as we serve the Lord inevitably we will see more and more of our sin, weakness and failings (that is part of Christian maturation). And yet we must understand:

- The sin that is discovered as we grow in grace was there all the time; we just didn't see it. Yet God did!
- And when He issued forth the promise at our conversion that our sins are forgiven, He wasn't simply talking about the sin we saw, but the sin He saw!
- And because God's word cannot be thwarted (the third section of this Psalm), we conclude that the forgiveness God proclaims on account of His grace is also a certainty!

This is how and why faith is such a crucial part of our walk in Christ- "waiting upon Christ's Lovingkindness" (Psalms 147:11). As you come face to face with discovered sin in your Christian maturation. The realization that the former glory in your walk with Christ is all but gone; you are a much greater sinner than you ever thought.

Disappointment and then discouragement set in. The call is to take your eyes off yourself and place them through thick and thin upon His Lovingkindness (that is the point of the center stanza of this Psalm, vv. 7-11)! John Miller put it this way:

We think of God as a tyrant or harsh judge who has never really forgiven us; or maybe he's forgiven some of our sins but not all of them, especially not the habitual ones. [How could this NOT be God's people upon their return? Yet would you notice...] Faith can't flourish when you see God this way because all you see is your guilt rather than Christ's loving forgiveness through his blood. Faith looks at least ten times more at Christ than at your sin. (Miller, 2014, p. 13)

There is no better summary of the teaching and focus of this Psalm than those words! The life of blessing in the Kingdom of God is the life that waits upon the Lord- that takes its focus off ourselves, and places it squarely upon the Lovingkindness of God! With this, our delight and joy is knowing at all times the God the Lord is well-pleased with me!

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End Note(s)

¹ It was in light of this that Paul exhorted the believers in Galatia in Gal. 2:17-19, “But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be! [Christians sin and when they do, their behavior tells those with whom they have shared the gospel that *this* is why Christ died... so that we can sin freely! Paul was quick to reject this. So how is it that we can know grace and still sin? Paul gives the answer...] For if I rebuild what I have *once* destroyed [relating to God on the basis of our conduct], I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the Law I died to the Law [to law-keeping as the basis for God’s approval], that I might live to God.”

² Specifically, that the Lord would restore His people, Jer. 29:10.

³ J. M. Boice wrote, “Quite a few commentators suggest that Psalm 147 may have been written for the dedication of the reconstructed walls of Jerusalem in the time of Nehemiah, and they may be right. The twelfth chapter of Nehemiah tells how the Levites were brought to the city to lead a grand celebration “with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres” (Neh. 12:27). (*Psalms 107–150: An Expositional Commentary*, p. 1266)

⁴ It is as David wrote in Psalms 103:13-14, “Just as a father has compassion on *his* children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are *but* dust.”

⁵ Why is it that God deigned to re-establish the city of Jerusalem in 458 BC and not before or after? Because at that moment in time, that is what God’s people needed!

⁶ Hebrews 1:3b, speaking of Christ says, “[He] upholds all things by the word of His power.”

⁷ Consider Psalms 23 for example. The shift in Psalm 23 from a shepherd’s care to a king’s feast seems unrelated, until we consider the center verse... v. 4, “For you are with me.” This holds the psalm together by which both images of a shepherd tending his sheep and the feast of a king are brought into focus. God is ever and always with His people- upholding them, protecting them, providing for them! Accordingly, they need never fear! That’s the point.

⁸ Not surprisingly, it rests in the center section of this psalm as well.