

2.5.21 pm

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, if you've got Psalm 148 open in front of you, that would be helpful. I don't think anybody would disagree with me when I say that this year has been a strange year.
- This year past has been a strange year. To not be in the church building, most of us, to not be in the church building for the best part of a year has been a strange experience.
- And although we've been able to do things online, and although it's been much appreciated and people have said that, I know, and you know, because you've told me many times, that it's not the same.
- It's not the same to be watching something on a screen. It's different to being together in the Lord's house. And even now that we're back in church, and even now that we're able to come together on a Sunday evening, it's great to have that experience, it's great to have the encouragement of being back together, but even now, it's not the same.
- And you said that to me. It's not the same. And the question I want to ask just at this point is, why is that? And the answer that I would suggest is, the thing that makes it different now to what it was before, is that we cannot join our voices together to praise the Lord.
- [1 : 5 6] It's an encouragement to hear God's praises being sang, as Farukhar Ahsang, and as ENA sang this morning, and as we've heard many sing over the last months.
- But it's different when we cannot join our voices together to praise the Lord. Our hearts may be moved with a desire to praise the Lord, but it's such a strange thing to be in this place together.
- It's such a difficult thing, and a spiritually unnatural thing of that such a phrase. that I can use not to be able to join our voices together to praise the Lord.
- And I think there's always going to be something lacking in the service until we're actually able to do that, until we're all able to respond and audibly from our hearts with our voices.
- And I think that is something the psalmist would have fully understood, because this psalm is such a clear call, and it's such a bright example of what it sounds like to praise the Lord.
- [3 : 1 9] So three points this evening, in the time that we've got. The first thing we see here, or we hear here, is there's a call to praise the Lord.
- That's how the psalm begins. Point one, there's a call to praise the Lord. And then the second thing we come to in the course of the psalm is we see something of the benefits of praising the Lord.
- And then the final section of the psalm is we have various reasons given for praising the Lord. So first of all, there's the call to praise the Lord.
- Now there are some students here tonight with us. Some who are in university, some who are doing various training things, some who are still in school.
- And there's others who were once students, and you can think back to the days when you were students. I was thinking back to the days when you would be asked in English to do a book report.

[4 : 23] Do you remember being asked to do a book report? The deadline comes closer and closer, and you're thinking, I must get that book read so I can write a report on it. And then you realise too close to the wire that you're not going to have time to read the book.

But you still have to write the book report. So what do you do? Well, what you tend to do, or what I used to do, was I would read the first chapter, and I would read the last chapter, and I'd scan a wee bit in the middle, and you'd get the kind of gist of what the book was all about.

Or think about the days when you used to go and actually buy CDs and records. I was thinking back to when there were record shops.

The young ones wouldn't even know what we're talking about. And you could go into shops like HMV. You could see the CD that you wanted to buy. You could put the headphones on. And if you didn't have much time, but you wanted to get a taste of the album before you bought it, I used to listen to the first track and listen to the last track.

And that would kind of give you some kind of idea as to what the whole thing was going to sound like. And as we look at Psalm 147 here, look at how it begins in verse 1.

[5 : 41] It begins with a call to praise the Lord. And then if we fast forward along to the end of the psalm in verse 20, how does it end?

Well, it ends with a call to praise the Lord. And the whole psalm is essentially a call to praise the Lord. That's the thrust of all of it.

That's the application of it. Through the psalmist, we are arrested, we are called to attention and we are directed to praise the Lord.

And I think if we're honest, we'll acknowledge that that's a necessary call. Sometimes people call us and we don't know why they bother because there was no need for them to call us.

But this is a necessary call because there are so many other competing calls in this world for our time and our attention. I think we're probably busier today than we ever have been.

[6 : 52] Even in lockdown when everything seemed to grind to a halt, we found within 10 minutes that our lives were actually busier than they ever were. We thought we were going to be doing next to nothing but we then discovered Zoom and we discovered Teams and we discovered all kinds of things online and we were busy again.

family life is busy which can be a real blessing. School further education it can be intense.

Our working lives can be demanding. My observation of those who are retired, they sometimes seem to be busier than those who are working. Our social lives which used to mean going out and meeting friends from time to time.

Now our social lives are lived mainly on screens. We're responding to multiple messages every hour. It takes up so much of our time. And you know yourself, you can fill in the blanks as you think about your diaries, as you think about your days.

But we know that there are so many demands on our time. Some of these things can be good things. But sometimes the accumulation of these things causes us to forget our first calling.

[8 : 20] And our first calling is to praise the Lord. Why are we here? We're not on planet earth to make money.

we're not on planet earth to make a name for ourselves. We're not on planet earth to build our own little kingdoms.

We're here to seek first his kingdom. We're here to praise the Lord. So this psalm, it begins and it ends with that reminder to praise the Lord.

So that's the first point. There's this call to praise the Lord. And the second thing we see here is there are benefits. The psalmist goes into the benefits of praising the Lord.

Sometimes when we hear a call, we can be reluctant to respond to it. Parents, when we call our children from upstairs to downstairs, they don't always, in my experience, come bounding down the stairs with a big smile on their faces saying, what is it, Dad?

[9 : 34] Very often when you call, eventually on the fourth time you call, after you've roared all the way up the stairs, they come trudging down the stairs and say, what is it, Dad?

Is it the dishes? Is it tidying this? Is it tidying that? Is it the next thing? What is it that I have to do now? There can be a reluctance sometimes to respond to a call.

And I think sometimes we can have that attitude when we think about our primary call, and that's the calling to praise the Lord.

There can be a reluctance sometimes for us to do that. We're so busy doing other things, as I said, so that when we hear the call of God, sometimes, even though we respond, we might be sitting here, or we might be sitting with an open Bible in our homes, that there can be a grudging sense of duty.

Sometimes, if we're honest. Is that not true? I vividly remember sitting at my desk one Wednesday evening when I was working in Inverness, probably 20 years ago now.

[11 : 02] And I had a pile of work to do, but truth be told, I could have waited until the morning. Wednesday night, prayer meeting night.

And I knew that I should go to the prayer meeting, but I was wrestling with it. And if I'm honest, I just didn't want to go that night. I wasn't really feeling like it.

I wasn't feeling great within myself. And I thought, the second I walk in that door, and I see him not having me up on my feet praying. So I was sitting at my desk, and there was this wrestle going on.

And to cut a longer story short, at 25 past 7, I dashed out of the office. And I got in the car, and I drove, and I went to the prayer meeting, somewhat reluctantly.

And yes, I was called to pray on the second I walked in the door. But the surprising thing, the memorable thing about that night was, although I went there with the wrong attitude, I received such blessing, such benefit, as I responded to the call to praise the Lord.

[12 : 23] And the psalmist here, he presses that in on us. And he reminds us, not only of the call, but of the benefits, the blessing that it is to praise the Lord.

And he says, first of all, it's good to praise the Lord, how good it is to sing praises to our God. God. And there is such a thing, let's remember still, there is such a thing as good and bad.

I know we live in a kind of topsy-turvy culture, where everything is being turned upside down. What was once good is now considered bad, what is once bad is now considered good.

We don't know where we are as a culture. But God has determined, and God has revealed to us, clearly through his word, that some things are good, and some things are bad.

Think about the medical world for a moment. There's an agreement on the fact that there are good things and there are bad things. To smoke a hundred cigarettes a day, and to eat a super abundance of pie and chips, and to do no exercise, that's bad.

[13 : 37] Every medic will tell you that. And in the spiritual sense, there are things that we can do that are bad for us. John McSween, often when he prays at the prayer meeting, he prays about the fact that we can have a leanness of soul, sometimes.

And sometimes that's caused by the music we listen to. sometimes it can be caused by the things that we watch. Sometimes it can be caused by the habits that we form or the company that we keep.

That ends up being spiritually damaging, and it causes our souls to dry up. We have that leanness of soul. There are things that we can do that are bad for us in our souls.

So what is good? What can we do that will bring spiritual health and vitality?

What can we do that will cause spiritual growth, not decay? What can we do that will cause our souls to expand and not wither?

[14 : 58] Well, the answer, according to the psalmist, is good. It brings life, vitality.

Let me praise the Lord. How good it is to sing praises to our God. There is a benefit to our souls to sing praises to the Lord.

It's good. The second thing the psalmist says here is it's pleasant to praise the Lord. how pleasant it is to praise Him. Sometimes we talk about the feel-good factor.

You might watch a film and it's a feel-good film. And after you've watched it, you've got that kind of warm glow about you. Or there's things that we can do and they kind of feel-good to have done them.

I was speaking to Florane last week and she was telling me the day before I was speaking to her, she tidied the cupboards. She said it was quite a job, but it feels good to have done it.

[16 : 07] And you know the best feeling we can have, the most pleasant thing we can do is to be in close communion with God. To live lives where we are from our hearts and with our voices and with our whole lives praising the Lord.

And I think every Christian, if you speak to them, will agree on that. Although sometimes we drift from it.

And I know as we thought about this morning, there are times in our lives when we can have a dryness, there can be dry seasons, difficult seasons that we have to actually persevere through.

But the reality is the most pleasant thing that we can ever experience in our lives is that intimacy that is offered to us in that close walk with God.

And if there's someone here tonight or who might listen later tonight to this who's not a Christian, I would say to you, taste and see that God is good.

[17 : 36] The devil is the one who whispers in our ear and says, to follow Jesus is boring, it's dry, it's dull, life is over. The opposite is true.

there is nothing better, there is nothing more good, there is nothing more pleasant than praising him.

So the psalmist says it's good to praise the Lord, it's pleasant to praise the Lord, and the final thing under this section is it's fitting to praise the Lord, it's the right thing, it's the fitting thing.

How pleasant and fitting to praise him. I was speaking to Ross Miller, who lives over in Scalpy last week, and he was telling me that he was doing a lot of work in the house the last while.

There's various jobs that he did that he enjoyed, but he says the job I've been doing the last while, which was horrendous, was trying to put laminate floor down in the kitchen. He says I bought this stuff and it just didn't quite fit together.

[18 : 51] So he said I would cut the thing and try and lay it down and I would put the one sheet of laminate down on the floor and it would look fine, and then I would get the next sheet and I'd put that in place and once that was in place the first one would pop back up.

He said it was a horrendous job because nothing quite fitted together. And that's a picture of a life that does not praise the Lord.

We try to fit in here. We try to fit in there. We try to fit in the next place. We give ourselves to this thing. We give ourselves to that thing and nothing quite fits, nothing quite satisfies.

We pour ourselves into a hobby, occupies us for a wee while, then we lose interest. We give ourselves to our work and after a while we really realise that it's not fulfilling.

there's that restlessness that Augustine speaks of. There's a sense deep down that we're not doing what we were made for.

[20 : 06] And what were we made for? Well, you know your catechism. Man's chief end, man's first purpose, what man and woman and boy and girl were made for is to praise the Lord, to glorify God.

There's an eternal joy and satisfaction when we do that, how fitting it is, how good it is, how pleasant it is to praise the Lord.

So there's the call to praise the Lord. Then there's the benefits of praising the Lord and in the final section we have reasons for praising the Lord.

And if you scan down, you may be in a state of alarm thinking if it took him this long to get through the first verse, how long are we going to be here for? But I don't intend to step through these verses in detail.

What I want to do is really just read through these verses with you. You know, we could actually take this section and divide it into various categories.

[21 : 32] It would be possible to do that. One of the commentators couldner, you could think about this later yourselves, is if you look at verses 1 to 6, we see that God is the one who redeems us.

If we look at verses 7 to 11, we see that God is the one who cares for us. If we look at verses 12 to 20, we see that God is the one who commands us. And we could look at the psalm in that way and categorize it in that way, which would be my normal approach.

But sometimes, I think when you try to divide the psalm neatly into the headings, we lose something of the beauty of it.

And that's my conviction over this psalm. You know, you don't dissect the swallow to hear the song. You hear the swallow sing, but if you take hold of the swallow and start to dissect it to get a closer listen to the song, you don't hear the song better, you destroy the song.

And sometimes the best thing for us to do is to just stand back in awe and read the psalm. And just consider carefully, as we pour over the verses, who God is.

[23 : 01] and what he has done for us, as we see him in the words of scripture. As we hear this revelation of who God is in these verses, our hearts, I pray, will be moved to praise the Lord.

So let's just bring this to conclusion. by reading through these verses and thinking about the majesty and the beauty and the power and the love and the grace of God.

Verse 2, the Lord builds up Jerusalem. He gathers the exiles of Israel. It reminds me of going to Nehemiah when you think about that verse.

Remember how the Lord used Nehemiah to build up Jerusalem that was broken down, to gather the Lord's people that were all over the place.

they're gathered together once more to worship God and it was the Lord that did it. Nehemiah would be first to see it. In terms of the church today, the New Jerusalem, those who gather in buildings like this, it's the Lord who does it.

[24 : 33] It's Jesus who said, I will build my church. And he's still building. We're here tonight because God has appointed that we'll be here tonight.

And I'm amazed when I hear of people who have been far away for a long time and who suddenly begin to be drawn back to the Lord.

It's the Lord who does that work. I heard about it even in the last few days. I heard about someone who listened to Alistair's testimony and who was drawn back to consider who God is.

It's the Lord who builds up Jerusalem. It's the Lord who's working. It's the Lord who gathers us in. Maybe he's gathering somebody in tonight. maybe there's somebody here who's been far away and the Lord is working to draw you in.

It's his work. He's the one who builds. He's the one who heals, verse 3. He heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds.

[25 : 58] How many of us could tell that story? How many times have we sat here and in other churches at different times and sang this very song?

And felt our hearts sore? And known the Lord draw close and minister in a way to bind up the wounds of our heart to bring his healing comforting touch to us.

He's the God who comforts. He's the God who builds. He draws us in. He determines verse 4, the number of the stars and calls them each by name.

As I was reading this week, I was learning that even after so many years of scientific advance, even with all the equipment that we have today, we still have no idea of how many stars there are.

One expert wrote this, he says, a typical galaxy may contain anywhere between 10 million and 1 trillion stars. Therefore, he says, using a very rough estimate of 100 billion galaxies in the observable universe, and the number of stars in our own galaxy is a reasonable average, there may be around 10 billion trillion stars in the observable universe.

[27 : 28] That number is 10 with 27 zeros after it, I think. And that's the best estimate just now, of how many stars there are, but the scientists are quick to say it's just a rough estimate, we really don't have any idea.

But we do know from the same scientist as there are far more stars in the galaxies than there are grains of sand on planet Earth.

And when we just try to think about these things, it blows our minds. I don't know how many million grains of sand are in the back of my car, never mind on Luskentara Beach, never mind on all the beaches on planet Earth.

And yet we're told the stars in the galaxies are vastly more than the grains of sand on the planet. And when we think about these things, and think about the fact that he determines the number of stars, he calls them by name, he places them in the positions that he will determine they be, our minds blow, but we say in verse 5, great is our Lord and mighty in power.

It's understanding has no limit. And yet what does God do with his power?

[29 : 04] Well, verse 6 tells us the Lord sustains the humble, but he casts the wicked to the ground. It's the opposite of what we see happening in this world with power.

power. Those who have power trample the humble to get more power. But the all-powerful God uses his power to sustain, to lift up the humble, to cast the wicked to the ground.

God and so the psalmist says in verse 7, sing to the Lord with thanksgiving. Do you see him? Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving.

Make music to our God in the heart. He covers the sky with clouds, verse 8. He supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow in the house.

He provides food for the cattle and for the young ravens when they come. We look up to the sky, we look down at the grass, we look at the food on our plates and we're reminded of the power and the provision of God for his people and creation.

[30 : 32] His pleasure, verse 10, is not in the strength of the horse nor his delight in the legs of a man. The Lord delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.

Again, we see something of God's ways there. The horse, the legs of man, they're pictures of power and force. And that's the kind of thing that excites us.

We like to see power and force. But as the commentator Tidbal says, God does not take pleasure in animal or human strength, but in people's holiness and faith.

So extol the Lord, O Jerusalem, says the psalmist. Praise your God, O Zion, for 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 of wheat. The psalmist there, he reflects on the fact that God is at work in providence, the peace and the security that they were enjoying in these moments, the satisfaction of having the harvest come in and having food in their plates, the evidences of God's hand.

[32 : 01] there are reasons to be thankful, there are reasons to give praise. I think we're poor at this. I think we're really poor at this.

And I think the children teach us week on week to be thankful to God. When the children meet for their prayer meeting on a Wednesday evening before the main prayer meeting, I have to say there's not a week that passes where they don't thank God sincerely for their homes and for the food in their plates, for shelter.

They recognise everything that they have, that we so often take for granted, the water in our glasses. They recognise God is the one who gives it.

God is the one who gave us love. And yet the greatest thing he gave was his beloved son Jesus, who died on a cross to give us a peace and security that is eternal.

he died to give us a soul satisfaction that no one else can give, a heart healing that can be received from no other source.

[33 : 35] Verse 15, he sends his command to the earth, his word runs swiftly, he spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes, he hurls down his hair 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.

We're reminded there as the psalm comes to a close, and so must we're reminded in these verses of God's powerful word.

He speaks, and the creation response, he speaks, and he graciously reveals himself and his will to people, even sinful, fallen, broken people like Jacob and Israel, and us.

So there's just a few reasons for praising the Lord. The call to praise the Lord, the benefits of praising the Lord, and these are just a few reasons we are given for praising the Lord.

[35 : 13] So how do we finish? How does the psalmist finish? Well, there's only one way to appropriately finish, and that's to shout out, praise the Lord.

We'll pray. Amen. Heavenly Father, we pray that you would take your word and bring it in the power of the Holy Spirit to our hearts.

Reveal yourself more and more to us, we pray, and enable us truly and sincerely to praise you, for you alone are worthy.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.