

God's New Year Resolution for 2010

a sermon on Psalm 147

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I am moving into what some people call middle age. Others call it youth; some teenagers consider it old age. I like to think of it as my prime. Whatever we call it, I have enough years on me now to understand how one's perspective changes as the years pass. Things look different to a man of 40 than to a man of 20. At least some things do. What do you think? Do we change as we get older, or do we just see more clearly?

I can never think about time without thinking about God. God is with me in this moment, but while I bring to this moment my limited experience, God brings eternity. As I understand eternity, God stands outside of time, so that every moment is present to him. God acts within time, but time is not a limit on God. If I'm right, then God sees not only me but all my ancestors and all my descendants as well. Of this I am certain, God does not experience time as we do. Time limits us. It changes us. God created time. I cannot imagine the perspective this gives him.

The best scientific estimate says the earth is 4.6 billion years old. The universe, of course, is older still. Think about that! God was there! He created the heavens and the earth. From the beginning, he not only observed, he created. He guided the processes that made our planet habitable. He brought forth life. By whatever means, he made us in his image. He was there when humans began to farm and domesticate animals. He saw the first villages and cities. Do you marvel at that? I do. The same God who called Abraham on a starry night 4,000 years ago is with us today. We worship him just as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did. The God who created Israel and bought them out of Egypt, created his church 2,000 years ago. He still guides us today. If you ever wonder how God can be so patient when the world is so full of evil, well, God is incredibly patient. He has literally seen it all.

Scripture tells us that God does not change. He is the same, yesterday, today, and forever. He is faithful to all generations. His character remains constant, so we can depend on him. All this is true. Therefore, you may think my sermon title is a cheap trick. God's character needs no improvement and never changes, so what sort of New Year's Resolution would God make? Plus, our calendar is more or less arbitrary. Jews and Muslims have different calendars. So do the Chinese. New Year's Day was April 1 in the old pagan days of Western culture. Why should God mark our New Year as special?

And yet, in my defense, I say that God created the passing seasons. He set the earth spinning around the sun roughly once every 365 days. He put the moon and the stars in the sky. And these things – the seasons, the moon, and the sun – are the basis for all calendars. I think God intended us to mark time. He created us with the capacity to remember and to mark time's passing. He gave us the ability to discern the seasons. And yes, God's character does not change, but God does act in history. There was one specific day when the sun rose on Egypt, and God said, "Today I set my people free." On one specific Friday, Jesus Christ died on a cross. The following Sunday he rose again from the dead. God knew the exact date from all eternity. He acted on that one day. And he acts still. Who knows what he will do in 2010? I am sure I don't. Whom will he bring to faith? What will he do in your life or mine? God alone knows, but you can be sure he has a purpose.

I think God does have a New Year's resolution, the same one he has every year: to act this year in keeping with his purpose and his character. We do not know what he will do, but thanks to his revelation in scripture, we know his character and his purpose.

Psalms 147 calls us to praise God – with good reason. This psalm weaves together God's work in creating and sustaining the world with his work of saving us. Call these works creation and redemption, or simply say that God made us and he saves us. In this psalm, these two different works of God come together, and we see them for what they are: Different ways that God expresses his character. Psalm 147 shows us who God is by telling us what he has done.

Psalms 147 has three sections, and it is worth digging into the details at this point so that you appreciate the payoff later on. Psalm 147 wants us to know that the power behind the universe – the power that created the stars and set up the cycle of seasons and all the systems upon which life depends – this power is not an impersonal force but a person, and he cares for you. That's where we're going, but the ride is half the fun, and you don't want to miss the sights along the way.

The three sections are verses 1-6, 7-11, and 12-20. Each section begins with a command: "Praise the Lord!" "Sing to the Lord ... make melody to our God." And again, "Praise the Lord!" Each section will go on to give us reasons to do these things, but I want you to realize what the command is for. You can sit down with the best information science can offer – such as the earth has been around roughly 4.6 billion years. You can ponder God's power as Creator. If the psalmist had reason to marvel at God because the stars were so orderly in the sky, we have more reason to marvel because we know those little lights to be gigantic heat engines burning hydrogen and helium. Our sun is about average for a star, both in size and power. The largest stars are more than 100 times its size and give off 1 million times more power. Some stars are thousands of light years away from us, meaning their light left their surface thousands of years ago and has been

blazing through vast space at unimaginable speed ever since, until it reaches us in this moment. Those sorts of facts touch our minds. We *know* God is a wonderful Creator.

Likewise, you can sit by the ocean and watch the sunset and marvel at God's beauty in creation. That touches your heart. You *feel* God is a wonderful creator. Psalm 147, however, would have us not only know and feel but also *experience* God's glory. How do we *internalize* God's glory, so that it changes us and becomes part of us? Worship! We praise God. We sing of God's glory. We praise him for creation. We praise him for loving us and making himself known to us. We sing of his grace. We praise his love and power. Praise is something we do. I don't know the exact figures, but you remember only a small portion of what you read or hear. You remember a lot more of what you do. Praise is our way of participating in God's glory. When we praise, we use our minds and hearts, but also more. We think, we feel, we do. So praise is important. These commands are not window dressing. God is worthy of our praise. And although he does not need our praise, we need to praise him. Worshiping God is a need every human being has deep down, because God made us that way. He made us that way because he loves us and he wants to share his glory with us. So when you praise God, you participate in God's glory. You internalize it so that it becomes a part of you. Knowing facts and seeing beauty are good. Attributing them to God is better. Best of all is when you take it to that next level and you praise God.

OK, then. After each section of psalm 147 commands us to praise, it gives us good reasons why. These reasons fall into two categories: God's work in creating and preserving life – that's one. The other is how God saves his people. The two get jumbled up. It's almost like a ping-pong game, back and forth from one to the other. The reason for this is that the psalm wants us to see these two different things God does together. Together they reveal his character, and his character is trustworthy and faithful. Our hope in him is not misplaced.

Look at the first section, verses 1-6. After the command to praise, we are told why God is worthy of praise: He builds up Jerusalem and gathers up the outcasts of Israel. This is a reference to the end of the exile. God's eternal purpose in creating the world was to love us. Part of that purpose was to create for himself a special people who know and love and worship him. God's love is as big as the whole world (even bigger), but he started small, with Abraham and Sarah, then Israel, then the Messiah. So what we have here is a specific historical example of God saving his people.

Then it says, "He heals the brokenhearted." Again, God saves us, but this is not tied to one historical moment. It is the sort of thing he does all the time. Next line: "He determines the number of the stars." We don't know how many there are, billions at least. God knows. He made them. It goes on, "God is abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure." And then, after calling us to ponder the

unsearchable wonders of creation, the psalm brings us back down to earth with the next line: "The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground."

If you follow the psalm carefully, you might get dizzy, bouncing back and forth from soaring heights to scraped knees. And do you see why? The power that made those billions of stars has a face, and he smiles on us. In his grace, he delights in us. He cares if we are brokenhearted or downtrodden. How can you not praise a God like that? A simple god of power, who creates a marvelous universe but does not care a whit about what happens to us – that we can imagine. People have invented and worshiped gods like that. A loving god who listens when we cry out – that too we can imagine. People have been inventing that kind of god and seeking comfort that way longer than recorded history. But to have both qualities in one God! God spreads the stars across the cosmos, and he still cares for you! That is beyond our comprehension, much less our imaginations. God establishes an orderly creation and brings forth life, yet he loves justice and he heals the brokenhearted! Amazing! And worthy of praise!

The second section, verses 7-11 is similar. After the command to sing God's praise, it tells us why: God provides rain for the earth. He causes the plants to grow. He gives food to the animals. He hears and answers when young ravens cry. I read a great sermon once by Victor Shepherd, in which he argued that you can't blame God if people go hungry. Even with the bulging population now on our planet, there is enough food to go around. Dr. Shepherd cited the appropriate facts and figures about hectares of arable land, grain production, and that sort of thing. He said God has provided. If people go hungry, the fault lies with humankind. That's a good gospel sermon, because people do go hungry, and it is our fault, and that fault is rooted deep in human nature, so the only real, permanent solution is a Savior. But God provides. He provides for our physical needs; he has provided us a Savior. If he hears the young ravens when they cry, will he not hear you?

The final section, verses 12-20, describes how God protects us. "He strengthens the bars of your gates" – it is thinking of Jerusalem again, which had literal bars on gates. And yet, this is a symbol of God's protection in every age. Protecting his people is characteristic of God. It is something he does because of who he is. Set against images of peaceful borders and children with full tummies, this last section offers us snow and hail as symbols of God's sovereign power. Indeed, more powerful than any natural phenomenon is God's all-powerful Word. God's Word here means more than just scripture. It refers to God's will and purpose. What God decides to do, he does. And we know from his Word that his purpose for creating us and taking care of us, is to make us his. To save us. To forgive us through Jesus Christ. To make us a new creation. And to share his love and glory with us eternally. Such is his character and purpose.

As this New Year dawns, you may feel uncertain ... or afraid. Or confident. Who knows what 2010 holds in store for us? Of one thing we can be sure: God. His character and purpose do not change. He is faithful to all generations. He has seen it all. He put the stars in place. He is faithful. He sustains life by providing for our needs. Above all, he is full of grace and steadfast love. You can count on him. He will see you through. He will accomplish his purpose for you. Amen.

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