

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Delightful God

Psalm 147:1-11

"Praise the Lord. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him!" (v. 1). Today's text begins with a call to worship. Last Sunday, we saw that responding to the call to worship isn't enough. God also requires us to respond to the call to righteousness. The praise we offer with our lips in our congregational gatherings is supposed to be coupled with the praise we offer with our lives as we, individually and together, practice the ways of God's kingdom, seeking his justice and peace in the world. In this way, we embody and reflect the priorities of God and the character of God.

But as we also noted last Sunday, this doesn't mean that our life of congregational praise and thanks is a minor or unnecessary thing. Just because we answer the call to righteousness doesn't mean we cease the call to worship. "Praise the Lord" is still essential to our identity as God's people redeemed in Christ. Today's Scripture is part of a psalm that, along with four others, brings the entire book of Psalms to a close. Each of these five psalms begins with the word "Hallelujah" ("Praise the Lord"). So this part of the Bible concludes with music, with singing that reflects and conveys the joy of God's presence.

Note also how praising God is described as "pleasant" and "fitting." That's certainly true of the act of worship itself, but the terminology here is ambiguous, and maybe intentionally so. The psalmist may also be using "pleasant" not just to describe worship but also to describe God. In other words, the God we worship and serve is a God who takes pleasure in what he does. He takes joy in creating and redeeming. He experiences gladness through making and saving. He takes great pleasure in working for our life and wholeness and for the welfare of his entire creation.

Pastor Jeremy Treat writes:

My high-school basketball coach was a classic, old-school screamer who motivated with fear and shame. His voice was powerful, but I heard it only when I did something wrong. If I turned the ball over on offense or blew my assignment on defense, practice would stop, and the shaming would begin. Red in the cheeks and foaming at the mouth, he would scream until I had to wipe the spit off the side of my face. I never really knew him outside of basketball practice, but I know he was an angry man.

Many people have a similar view of God. They believe he's a grumpy old man who has to get his way, and that when he doesn't, he will shame, guilt, and scare people to get them in line. Although most wouldn't say it out loud, deep down even many believers think of God as "the God who is out to get me," that he is waiting for us to mess up so he can meet his divine quota for punishing sin. Perhaps this comes from a particular teaching or from a bad experience with a church or a Christian, but either way, this is how many functionally view God.

When we open the Bible, we encounter a very different God. The God who delights. The God who sings. The God who saves.¹

Treat goes on cite Zephaniah 3:17: "The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing." Often, says Treat, we focus so much on what God has saved us from that we overlook what God has saved us for. Yes, God is grieved by our sins and disobedience. He opposes our opposition to his will and way. He is rightfully wrathful toward our rebellion. But through Christ's death for our sins, God has acted mercifully, in reconciling love, bringing us from eternal condemnation into eternal life. Through faith in Jesus, you and I already participate in and experience this life, God's very own life of joy and gladness. As Treat summarizes it, "God does not tolerate his people; he delights in us."²

This emphasis on God's delight comes into focus at the conclusion of today's text where the psalmist says, "His pleasure 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" (vv. 10-11). What brings God delight? What gives him pleasure? What impresses God? Is it our displays of human power? Is it our military hardware, our historic institutions of higher learning, our growing GDP, or our prosperous megachurches? Is it our AI chips, our smartphones, or our satellites orbiting the planet? Or is it something more down to earth like the Pyramids of Giza, the Colosseum in Rome, or the toned arms and legs of a skilled athlete at the upcoming Paris Olympics?

The 1981 film *Chariots of Fire* tells the true story of two British runners competing in the 1924 Olympics. One of them, Eric Liddell, is a devout Christian. His sister Jennie wants him to leave competitive running and join the family on the mission field in China. The way Jennie sees it, Eric is putting running ahead of serving God, and she questions his commitment. In one scene, Eric tries to help his sister see his point of view. Eric announces with a smile, "I've decided I'm going back to China. The missionary service has accepted." Jennie interrupts him, "Oh, Eric, I'm so pleased." Eric continues, "But I've got a lot of running to do first. Jennie, you've got to understand. I believe that God made me for a purpose, for China. He also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure. To give it up would be to hold him in contempt. You were right; it's not just fun. To win is to honor him."

No doubt, God is honored by and takes pleasure in the ways that we exercise our gifts for his glory. He delights in seeing the potentialities of his creative power come forth in our lives and in the world. But at the same time, the psalmist reminds us that God doesn't need and isn't impressed by human displays of power. Rather, God is most pleased when you and I yield ourselves to his sovereignty. When we trust in his rule in the world and in our lives, God experiences delight.

At the heart of God's sovereignty is faithful love rather than sheer force. True, as the psalmist says, "Great is our Lord and mighty in power" (v. 5). But God also shows us, most of all through Jesus Christ, that he exercises his power through self-giving and sacrifice. In Christ, God has given us his very self, so that we can live in restored relationship with him and each other. This is the God we're called to worship. This is the God to whom we sing praises, the God who scatters the stars in the sky and who, in recent days, has sent some rain to this part of his earth, to provide growth for plants and food for animals. This is more than just a matter of meteorology. It's above all a matter of theology, a reminder that the power behind the universe isn't just an impersonal force, an invisible *something* but actually *someone* who is intimately and inextricably involved in our lives and in the future of his creation, governing in faithful love. Praise the Lord!

The Westminster Shorter Catechism, one of the great summaries of Christian doctrine, in the form of questions and answers, begins, "What is the chief end of man?" And the answer: "To glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." To enjoy God, not as something we can accomplish on our own, or simply as a life goal, but primarily as a response to God's own joy.

Pastor John Piper says, "It is good news that God is gloriously happy. No one would want to spend eternity with an unhappy God. If God is unhappy then the goal of the gospel is not a happy goal, and that means it would be no gospel at all. But, in fact, Jesus invites us to spend eternity with a happy God when he says, 'Enter into the *joy* of your master' (Matthew 25:23)."³

Remember that even now, as we've gathered again today, we're in the presence of a joyful God who experiences delight when we trust in him, a God who takes pleasure in creating and saving. He doesn't come to us grudgingly. He isn't with us just as a matter of putting up with us. His goal isn't to endure us. His goal is to have us be holy as he is holy, and to reflect and embody his joyful presence in the world.

In an article titled "God the Merrymaker," author N. D. Wilson writes:

We Christians are the proclaimers of joy. We speak in this world on behalf of the One who made lightning and snowflakes and eggs. Or so we say. We say we want to be like God, and we feel we mean it. But we don't. Not to be harsh, but if we did really mean it, we would be having a lot more fun than we are. We are made in God's image and should strive to imitate him.

A dolphin flipping through the sun beyond the surf, a falcon in a dive, a mutt in the back of a truck, flying his tongue like a flag of joy. These all reflect the Maker more wholly than many of our endorsed thinkers, theologians, and churchgoers.

Look over our day-to-day lives. How do we parent, for example? Rules. Fears. Don'ts. "Don't jump on the couch." "No gluten in this house." "Get down from that tree." "Quiet down." "Hold still." We live as if God were an infinite list of negatives. In our bent way of thinking, that makes him the biggest stress-out of all.

We say that we would like to be more like God. Speak your joy. Mean it. Sing it. Do it. Push it down into your bones. Let it overflow your banks and flood the lives of others. At his right hand, there are pleasures forevermore. When we are truly like him, the same will be said of us.⁴

To be like God, to reflect the character and nature of God in the world, doesn't mean to be artificially happy. It doesn't mean to put on a smile at all times, even when, and especially when, our sinfulness and the world's suffering need to be squarely faced and reckoned with. After all, God himself is touched by and responsive to the brokenness and lostness of the world he has made. According to the psalmist, the one whose power brings the universe into existence is also the one who "gathers the exiles" (v. 2), "heals the brokenhearted" (v. 3), and "lifts up the humble" (v. 6). God doesn't delight in sorrow and suffering. He delights in redemption and restoration. That's his joy.

The book of Psalms opens with a description of the "happy" person as one who delights in God's instruction (1:1-2). Living in perpetual openness to the Lord's will is the core of gladness. So we shouldn't be surprised that in today's text, as the psalms begin to come to a close, we hear, "The Lord delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love" (v. 11). "Fear" is less about living in terror of God and more about living in awe and reverence toward God, exhibited in practical righteousness, walking in the Lord's

will and ways. This is coupled with hope, which means placing your confidence, and grounding your security, in God's faithful love. When you live with a fundamental dependence upon God for life and future, this pleases God and brings God delight. As Julian of Norwich captured it, "God loves us and delights in us, and so he wishes us to love him and delight in him and trust greatly in him."⁵

¹ Jeremy Treat, "God Is Not Out to Get You." *Christianity Today*. October 21, 2016. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/november/god-is-not-out-to-get-you.html> (July 10, 2024).

² Treat, "God Is Not Out to Get You."

³ Quoted in Matt Perman, "God Is Happy." *Desiring God*. June 27, 2007. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/god-is-happy> (July 11, 2024).

⁴ N. D. Wilson, "God the Merryman." *Christianity Today* (April 2014) 32.

⁵ Quoted in "Women in the Medieval Church." *Christian History*, No. 30.