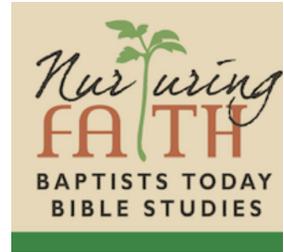


Adult Teaching Resources

January 3, 2016



A Good Way to Begin — Psalm 147:12-20

Jesus: The Curtain Rises

Of Water and Fire — Luke 3:15-22 (RCL 3:15-17, 21-22)

Of Water and Wine — John 2:1-11

An Old Scroll and a New Mission — Luke 4:14-21

A New Prophet and an Old Response — Luke 4:21-30

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A Good Way to Begin

Psalm 147:12-20

FIT Teaching Guide

by Rick Jordan

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Before the Lesson: Print the handout for the Transformational Exercise.

Fellowship Question

Use *one* of the following to break the ice, to begin discussion, and lead into the study:

If you had your choice, how often would we have snow? How much is “ideal” in your world?

When the weather report calls for snow, what is your first thought?

Information

Snow is not mentioned very often in the Bible, probably because Palestine does not get a lot of snow. However, for the last three winters, Jerusalem has received more snow than normal. According to the Jerusalem Post of February 20, 2015, the Israel Meteorological Service (IMS) said, “In Jerusalem, this is the third consecutive winter with a significant snow event — snow with a depth of 10 to 15 centimeters (4-6 inches) and above. The last time such a thing occurred was in the late 1940s.” Jerusalem normally receives an average of 4 inches of snow a year, but the February 2015 snowfall was 30 cm deep (11.8 inches). [This article has some great pictures, including one with a road lined with palm trees covered in snow: <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Israelis-across-country-wake-up-to-snow-391658>]

So, although it is rare, it is significant when it does snow in an arid land — and when snow is found in your Bible!

[Have a class member read Psalm 147:12-20.]

Hebrew poetry is different from our poetry. There is no attempt to make lines rhyme, although there are sometimes word plays with similar sounding words. There is no attempt to structure a poem with so many syllables per line or so many lines per stanza, though there is structure. One of those structures is called “chiasm” [pronounced with a hard k, ky´-az-um]. As one author describes it, “a chiasm is a repetition of similar ideas in the reverse sequence... A chiasm organizes themes much like a sandwich: A) a piece of bread on top, B) mustard, C) a delightful piece of meat, C´) another savory piece of meat, B´) more mustard, and finally A´) another piece of bread on the bottom. Chiasms generally focus on the flavorful meat, but the bread and mustard are necessary for a complete sandwich. Some chiasms do not have a mustard layer, other chiasms have lettuce on both sides of the meat,

Information *continued*

and some have just one piece of delicious meat.” (Source: <http://www.bible-discernments.com/joshua/whatisachiasm.html>)

[Write this on the board as you describe it, or as you have a class member read it to you:]

A Praise the Lord v. 12

B God’s unique care for God’s people vv. 12-14

C God sends out the divine word v. 15

D God sends out snow, wind, and hail vv. 16-17

C’ God sends out God’s word of power vv. 18-19

B’ God’s unique care for God’s people v. 20a

A’ Praise the Lord v. 20b

(Source: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2288)

In our culture, the main point in a paragraph is usually the first or the last sentence. But in a chiasm, the central point is found in the center. Let’s hear the center of this text again. As you listen, consider why this point is important to the poet?

[Have a class member read Psalm 147:16-17.]

Why do you think this passage is important to the poet? (As snow is unexpected, God’s word breaks through unexpectedly; As we are in awe of the beauty of winter weather, we are more in awe of the provider of this weather; We cannot endure the presence and power of God any more than we can endure severe cold weather, etc.)

There is another famous passage about snow in the Bible. As we listen to it, let’s consider what the prophet hoped to accomplish by this image:

[Have a class member read Isaiah 55:10-11.]

What point(s) does the prophet hope to accomplish? (As snow could be appreciated for its mere beauty, it has a deeper purpose — so God’s word could be appreciated for its beauty in literature, architecture, etc. — but it has a deeper purpose; Snow/water gives life, as God’s word does; etc.)

God’s provision for people and animals is part of Psalm 147, as well.

[Have a class member read Psalm 147:7-11.]

THE BIBLE LESSON writer, regarding the author of Psalm 147, notes, “Like other ancients, he did not consider wind or rain to be the result of global meteorological phenomena, but believed that the seasonal rains were a gift of God’s sustaining grace, not just to humans, but to the birds and animals as well.”

Information *continued*

In 2016, we debate climate change and global warming. The NASA website says, “Multiple studies published in peer-reviewed scientific journals show that 97 percent or more of actively publishing climate scientists agree: Climate-warming trends over the past century are very likely due to human activities. In addition, most of the leading scientific organizations worldwide have issued public statements endorsing this position.” (<http://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus/>)

If that many scientists agree that *humans* have something to do with the weather, I wonder what percentage would agree with the poet that *God* has something to do with the weather? What percentage of ordinary “man/woman on the street” do you think would agree that God has something to do with controlling the weather?

But we risk missing the point if we think that all the poet is saying is that God causes the weather. The point is God’s provision for the creation on earth. Without food, we would not live. Without water/snow, we would not live. Without God, there would be no soil, no rain, no food, no earthly existence.

If it is true that we human beings are making choices that put this creation at risk, do we human beings also have the responsibility to partner with God in providing food and water for animals and people? What is our role? How can we act as God’s partners when it comes to environmental issues?

The psalmist introduces us to a God who is more awesome/frightening/beautiful than a winter storm. He also introduces us to a God who is strong enough and creative enough to provide for the needs of all living creatures. A God who is this awesome and strong is so, so different from us, especially for those of us who are not as strong as a horse or as fast as a speeding bullet. We are ordinary, at best. Surely God has better things to do than be concerned with us?

[Have a class member read Psalm 147:1-6.]

What does this passage teach us about the character of God? (strong, intelligent, creative, compassionate, etc.)

With all we have heard thus far about a powerful God, our partnership with God, and God’s provision for people and animals, let’s hear another psalm that reiterates these truths.

[Have a class member read Psalm 8:1-9.]

Transformational Exercise

[Distribute the handout.]

As we enter a new year, we often make resolutions. We decide that we are going to do something to make our lives or the lives of others better.

I challenge you to think of this, maybe in a different way. It is a resolution to make a change, but it is not based on *your power*. It is based on your *partnership*. How will you join God in

Transformational Exercise *continued*

providing for people and for animals in this New Year? God is already at work. Are we?

On this snowflake, write a resolution of how you will dedicate yourself to partner with God in 2016 to improve the lives of God's creatures and God's creation. There may be one or there may be several things you will commit to doing. Then, have a silent prayer, asking God to accept your desire to be God's partner.

[After allowing some time for reflection, writing, and silent prayer, close in a prayer something like this: God, we are awed by your power and provision. And, we are amazed that you invite us to be partners with you in Creation. Help us to act for this world as you are acting for this world. Amen.]

Comments or Questions for Rick Jordan? You may send comments to the lesson plan author at rjordan@cbfnc.org. Rick is also available to lead workshops and conferences on Christian Education, with particular emphasis on how best to use the FIT Faith model.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

One psalm, or two, or three? — The Revised Common Lectionary text for the Sunday after Christmas is Psalm 147:12-20. Some commentators believe Psalm 147 is a combination of what were originally two or three psalms, and the LXX (an early Greek translation) divides it into two parts, with the first 11 verses numbered as Psalm 146 and vv. 12-20 as Psalm 147 (other psalms in the LXX are also numbered differently).

All of Psalms 146-50 begin and end with the word “Hallelujah,” as does Ps. 147. There is an essential unity in Psalm 147 as it appears, so we will include a brief look at all three sections in today’s lesson.

Rebuilding the temple — The account of the temple’s rebuilding can be found mainly in the book of Ezra, along with the prophetic works of Haggai and Zechariah.

The Second Temple — The dedication of the rebuilt temple in 515 BCE marks the beginning of what scholars call the “Second Temple Period.” Most scholarly references to the Second Temple, however, focus on the temple of the late first century BCE and the first 70 years of the first century CE, after Herod remodeled and greatly expanded the temple and rabbinic Judaism was reaching its greatest influence. The temple was razed by the Romans in 70 CE.

Haggai and Zechariah? — The LXX adds the names Haggai and Zechariah after the introductory “Hallelujah” in vv. 1 and 12. It does not include words of attribution, such as “by” or “according to,” but simply reads “Hallelujah, Haggai and Zechariah; sing praises ...” The awkward construction may indicate a belief that Haggai and Zechariah had something to do with the writing of the psalm, or it may be a tribute to them for their role in promoting the postexilic rebuilding of the temple, referenced in v. 2. In either case, the addition supports a postexilic setting for the psalm.

Build, or rebuild? — Translating v. 2 calls for a bit of interpretation. The verb translated as “build up” in the NRSV simple means “to build.” If we are correct in setting the psalm in the postexilic period, however, the translation “rebuilds” (as in NET) would be appropriate.

Likewise, the word NRSV translates as “outcasts” could refer to anyone who had been banished or driven away from their homes. To emphasize the postexilic setting, the NET translates the word as “exiles.”

Gates and dates — The reference to God’s strengthening Jerusalem’s city gates suggests that Psalm 147 was written during or after the governorship of Nehemiah, who not only led efforts to rebuild the city’s protective walls and gates (Nehemiah 2-6), but (with Ezra’s help) to re-educate the people on the history and significance of the covenant ordinances guiding their relationship with God (Nehemiah 8-9).

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

The Hardest Question is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Baptists Today*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Baptists Today* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Baptists Today* so they can prepare before the lesson.

What was God's "word" to Israel?

The psalmist's various references to God's "word" in Ps. 147:15-20 are interesting in their variety, and in what they suggest to us about our own use of the term "God's word." Some Bible readers and interpreters through the years have tended to take virtually every mention of "God's word" as a reference to the Bible, but the Bible as we know it did not exist in the time of the psalmists or the prophets — and no biblical author wrote with a conscious awareness that he or she was contributing to something that would later be considered to be holy scripture.

Hebrew has two primary terms that can be translated as "word," *amar* and *dabar*. Both can also take on the meaning of "command" or "order." The word *dabar* can also be translated as "thing."

The poet behind Psalm 147 used both terms, commonly in the sense of a "command." The NRSV translation of v. 15 says "He sends out his command (*amar*) to the earth; his word (*dabar*) runs swiftly." Later, God "sends out his word (*dabar*)" to melt the ice and snow (v. 18). In these verses, God's word is God's command to the forces of nature.

When we come to v. 19, we find two lines in synonymous parallel: "He declares his word to Jacob" is equivalent to "his statutes and ordinances to Israel." Here the psalmist would have had in mind things like the covenant commands found in the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, as well as in other legal materials scattered throughout the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, all of which claim to be words from God.

The heart of the covenant with Israel, as taught in the book of Deuteronomy, is that God's people should love the Lord with all of their being and teach their children to do the same (Deut. 6:4-9), with the understanding that God had promised blessings to those who lived in covenant obedience, and trouble to those who chose idolatrous ways instead.

The books of Joshua through 2 Kings built on the teachings of Deuteronomy to relate Israel's history from that singular perspective, noting the times when either individuals or the nation prospered or floundered, based on their willingness to live within the covenant and honor Yahweh. When prophets like Samuel, Elijah, or Elisha remind them of the covenant, they use terms like "thus says (*amar*) the LORD" (Judg. 6:8, 1 Sam. 10:18, 2 Sam. 12:7, 1 Kgs. 20:42, 2 Kgs. 7:1, and many others).

Pre-exilic prophets like Amos, Micah, and Isaiah warned the Hebrews that trouble would come if they did not honor God, speaking in oracles that likewise claimed to be words from the LORD (Isa. 7:7, Amos 5:4, Mic. 4:6, plus scores of other examples) they declared to be

The Hardest Question *continued*

“the word of God.” The exilic prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel explained to the exiles — as a word from God — how they had rebelled and why they deserved their fate, but could still have hope through repentance (Jer. 2:5, Ezek. 5:5, et. al.). Post-exilic prophets like Haggai and Zechariah urged the Hebrew remnant that returned to Jerusalem to be a faithful and holy people if they expected to prosper (Hag. 1:2, 5, 7; Zech. 1:3; and many more).

Psalms such as the author of Psalm 147 reflected this same theology in calling the former exiles to not only praise God for blessings given, but to live in such love and obedience that future benisons would be assured.

The Bible speaks often of the “word of the LORD,” or “God’s word,” always in the sense of God sending a prophetic word or declaring a command that the people should follow. Modern readers should be skeptical of taking that term and automatically applying it to the Bible as a whole. Rather, we should take the Bible seriously enough to recognize what it claims to be God’s word, and what it does not.

