

Psalm 107

SI: Please open your Bibles to Psalm 107.

We’re spending a few weeks looking at some selected Psalms,
meditating on what they show us about the life of faith.

This Psalm is about God’s love and four groups of people who experience his love.

So I’m going to read the introduction and then four different readers will read these next four sections, then we’ll skip to the very end and I’ll read last verse.

INTRO: Do you know what the fastest growing religious group in America is?

Polls say the fastest growing religious group in America is the nones.

Not nuns like Mother Angelica, n-u-n-s.

But nones, n-o-n-e-s. As in, What is your religious affiliation?

Are you Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish?

None of the above.

I was reading a document about a new PCA church plant on Long Island,
and it was describing the religious demographic of the community.

It said that many people are “nones.” It also used the phrases “de-churched,”
and “non-traditional beliefs about God and Jesus.”

So things are changing religiously in America in some profound ways.

But what’s interesting is that in spite of these very significant religious shifts,
many Americans are in agreement about one point of theology.

Do you know what that is? They believe God is loving.

They may be totally divided on who or what God is—he, she, or it—

but there’s still remarkable unanimity on this point, that God is loving.

Even many atheists affirm the idea of a loving God.

One of the main reasons they say they don’t believe in God is because of all the
suffering in the world.

Their argument goes: If God really existed, he wouldn’t tolerate all this suffering.

Why do they think he wouldn’t he tolerate it?

Because they assume he would be loving.

One more example of how everybody believes in God’s love is in political debates
over illegal immigration. Have you noticed how often one side will use the Bible
passages that talk about God’s love for the poor and the alien?

So this idea of God’s love has for some reason permeated our culture

and that makes Psalm 107 very relevant because it's about the love of God.
It ends with a challenge:

Whoever is wise, let him heed these things and consider the great love of the LORD.

That's a curious verse.

Heed these things.

We usually talk about heeding a warning, or heeding some very serious advice.

We don't talk about heeding love.

Then it says, consider the great love of the LORD.

That could be translated ponder it, meditate on it, puzzle over God's love.

Those aren't the ways we usually talk about love.

You just feel it love. You just accept love.

But the Psalmist says, heed it, ponder it, if you do this, you'll be wise.

Wisdom in the Bible is not just adding more information,

it's getting a transformed character by interaction with the living God.

So let's do that. Let's use this Psalm to consider and heed God's love.

We'll look at it under three points:

1. Where we are to ponder the love of God
2. What we are to ponder about the love of God
3. How we are to ponder the love of God

Before I go any farther, credit where credit is due:

a sermon on this Psalm by Tim Keller.

MP#1 Where we are to ponder the love of God

If we're supposed to ponder it, where is it? Where do we see it?

I've mentioned this interesting religious phenomenon in America, that most people think God is a loving being, whoever he may be.

Even people who aren't religious at all, if they're suddenly in a desperate situation, they start praying: God, help me. And they just assume God is listening, because of course he's listening and of course he cares. Where did that idea come from?

Is it a common idea in all the great world religions?

No, it's not. Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism—the eastern religions—

None of them teach that God is a personal being who interacts with individual human beings in a loving way. God is a force and individuality is an illusion.

What about Islam? Muslims believe God is all-powerful.

He can be merciful to those who keep his laws, but he's not loving or personally interested in individuals. His dealings with human beings are fatalistic.

If you have read any stories about some of the amazing conversions that are happening among Syrian refugees and even in Iran, it is the Christian message of the love of God and the love of Christ that is so compelling to Muslims.

So the idea of a loving God isn't a universal teaching in the great religions.

What about nature? Is God's love found in nature?

In Tim Keller's sermon he quotes extensively from Annie Dillard, who wrote an important book several decades ago called *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

She rejected Christianity and decided to observe nature and build her life on what she learned. But she saw how the vast majority of creatures born or hatched died or were devoured so that just a few of the species would survive. She saw giant water-bugs latch onto frogs, inject them with venom and suck out their insides.

She wrote:

Evolution loves death more than it loves you or me. This is easy to write, easy to read, and hard to believe. The words are simple, the concept clear—but you don't believe it, do you? Nor do I. How could I, when we're both so lovable? The universe that suckled us is a monster that does not care if we live or die . . . It is fixed and blind, a robot programmed to kill.

So you don't see the love of God in human intuition or human religion, and it's not in nature or the observation of nature.

Where did it come from? What does Psalm 107:43 say?

Whoever is wise, let him heed these things. What things?

The saving acts of God in history as recorded in the Bible.

God's dealings with Abraham and Moses and Israel.

These four groups of people in the Psalm, who are they?

We're going to see that they describe us in our situations in life.

But they are also allusions to the experiences of the people of Israel.

They wandered in the desert without a home, they were enslaved, and so forth. The Lord showed his love to Israel through his saving acts in history.

Only in the Bible does the idea of a loving God come into human consciousness.

And, only in the Bible do we have a framework for understanding God's love.

The Bible tells us that God created the world and he made it good.

And then it tells us that this good created was corrupted by sin

And then it tells us that God has not abandoned his creation or the human race, but he has broken into history and he's redeeming all things through Christ.

That's the framework: Creation, Fall, Redemption.

Only in that framework does the love of God make sense.

If all you believe in is creation, if God created the world this way with all the death, waste, disease, and disasters, then his love doesn't make sense. Powerful only.

If all you believe is the creation and the fall, that this world was good once and now it's messed up but God's not doing anything about it, then he's not loving either.

But if you believe that God made it good, sin messed it up, and God is now at work in history and in your life and through Christ redeeming this world—that's a framework in which his love make sense.

This is why so many people get disillusioned with God.

They've accepted the biblical idea that God is love, but they've rejected the biblical framework for understanding how his love works in history.

So they say things like: If God is love, why isn't he answering my prayers?

Why did that person die? Why is there so much suffering in the world?

It's sometimes hard to believe in God's love even within the biblical framework.

God, I know your word says you're working through Christ to redeem all things, but why are you taking so long? That doesn't seem very loving to me right now.

I'm not saying we won't have questions and doubts, but the biblical framework does give us the big answers. It tells us that God did not make things this way.

It tells us that he has not left us in a fallen world.

It shows us he has entered this world to redeem it through the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

So where do we ponder the love of God?

In his wonderful acts of redemption in history.

So let's consider now . . .

MP#2 What we are to ponder about the love of God

The reason I had our four readers this morning was to highlight the interesting structure of this Psalm.

Four different groups of people, four different and desperate situations.

But, I'm sure you noticed that all four ended with the very same refrain:

Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for men.

What this shows is that God's love is not one-dimensional, because God's not one-dimensional. He's a complex person.

Let's look at each situation.

The first people wanderers in a desert wasteland, homeless, maybe even lost.

They are hungry and thirsty and their lives are ebbing away.

What do they need? They need a Father.

This doesn't say anything about a father, it actually says they need a city where they can settle and God leads them to that city.

But in that time and culture, in the ancient near east,

you were connected to a city and had a place to call home through your father.

That's why it was such an step of faith for Abraham to leave the city of Ur—
it was the place of his fathers, it was the place he belonged.

If you were a homeless wanderer, you couldn't just move into a city and take up residence in the safety of the walls, you had to be connected by blood or tribe.

You had to have a father, a patriarch, who brought you in.

That's what the Lord is to the wanderer, he's a father, a home, a city.

What about the second group?

Prisoners in deepest gloom and iron chains. What do they need?

Not a father, they need a liberator, a King, even a Judge to declare their freedom.
And that's how God loves them, as a King and Judge.

He breaks their chains, cuts through gates of bronze and bars of iron
and brings them out, releases them from bondage and sets them free.

What's the situation of the third group?

They are very ill, so sick they loathe all food. They're wasting away, nearing death.
But notice this illness is something they've brought on themselves.

They became fools through their rebellious ways
and suffered affliction because of their iniquities.

You might think of someone who has destroyed his health through an addiction
or caught a disease through sexually immoral behavior.

What do these people need? They don't need a Father, King, Judge, need Physician

They need a Healer. But look how God's healing is described.
He sent forth his word and healed them.

He knows they need counseling to be completely healed.

They need to think differently about their lives.
So he shows his love as the Physician Counselor.

And then the last group, merchants on the high seas caught in the perfect storm.
They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths.

Terrible, terrifying waves threatening to sink them at any moment.

They are staggering around the deck like drunk men.

They don't need a Counselor—they need an all-powerful Friend.

Someone who cares about their lives and their plans, and who is strong enough to still the storm to a whisper and steer them to their desired haven, which he does.
Even their ship and merchandise is not lost.

Father, King, Judge, Physician, Counselor, Friend—

These are all different ways God expresses his love.

These are his love personas.

And throughout the Bible and throughout redemptive history the Lord reveals his love in these various ways because he's a complex person.

Well that's interesting, but so what?

How does this help us? How does this change us?

The Psalmist calls heeding and pondering God's love a matter of wisdom—
it's something that can transform your character—how does it happen?

So that brings us to a practical matter . . .

MP#3 How we are to ponder the love of God

I've told you this story before, but let me mention it again.

Several years ago I was flying somewhere and my seatmates were a married couple.

We got to talking and they mentioned they were Unitarian Universalists. I told them I had never met a Unitarian Universalist and would they please tell me what they believed. So they did, and the very first thing they said was: God loves everybody and doesn't judge anybody.

Tim Keller makes an insightful observation in his sermon.

He says everybody has a tendency to create a cartoon character God.

Depending on your personality and your view of the world, you will latch on to one of God's love personas and exclude the others.

So, he says, the tendency of traditional minded people and conservative people is to see God as King and Judge. He loves those who obey him.

On the other hand, the tendency of non-traditional, or liberal minded people is to see God as Friend. He loves everybody.

I felt that in my conversation on the airplane. In my mind I thought:

Yes, yes, God loves everybody, but that's not the point.

He's judge and king mostly.

I know it's a cliché, but we want to put God's love in a box we can understand.

God is a king and judge who loves those who obey him.

That's understandable. You can get your mind around that. No loose ends.

God is a friend who loves every body.

That's also a neat little box. No complexities there.

God as physician, that's ok, heal me and let me get on with life,

but I don't want God as counselor, because that means exposing me and forcing me to consider how he wants me to change my life and behavior.

God as Father, that's a mixed bag too.

For some people it's a greatly comforting image, but for others troubling.

Pastor who stopped referring to God as Father, triggered bad memories.

But if you have a one dimensional view of God's love, it won't change you.

You won't be moved to praise and worship like the Psalmist.

You have to believe and embrace and ponder every expression of God's love—that's what moves you to praise. That's what transforms you.

Look again with me at this second group of people starting in verse 10.

These are the prisoners suffering in iron chain in deepest gloom.

What happens? They cry out to the Lord and he saves them.

He breaks the gates, cuts through the bars, breaks their chains, brings them out.

But let me ask you a question: Who put them in prison in the first place?

Vs 11: They were in chains “for they had rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High. So he subjected them to bitter labor.” God himself imprisoned them. But then when they cried out he broke his own chains, he cut through his own bars to set them free.

If he was only King and Judge he would have said:

You’re going to stay there until you’ve paid for your crimes.

If he was only Friend, he wouldn’t have put them in there in the first place.

He would have let bygones be bygones.

But he’s both. He’s Judge and Friend. He locks them up and breaks them out.

The Psalmist doesn’t try to explain how God could be both at the same time, he responds with an outburst of praise. He’s changed by God’s love.

How much more should be changed, because we know the whole story.

Since the time this Psalm was written, God has continued to show his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men.

The Lord has continued to act in history, redeeming this world from sin and that culminated in Jesus Christ.

Jesus was crucified outside the city, he felt abandoned by his Father on the cross— so we could have a Father and an eternal city.

Jesus as made to be sin for us and suffered chains and gloom of death, so the bars and chains we deserve could be cut and we could be set free, liberated by King

Jesus bore our infirmities and carried our sorrows so we could be healed—

he is the great Physician and has sent us his Counselor to be with us forever.

Jesus was the greater Jonah who was cast into the storm of God’s wrath for us.

He’s our Friend who is always with us in the storms of life.

He loves us in all these ways.

If you need him, what do you do? Did you notice the another refrain:

Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.

If you don’t feel God’s love, perhaps you need to ponder love personas you’ve downplayed or ignored, until his love become amazing to you again.