

THE LORD REIGNS!

SERIES: THE HEART OF THE PSALMS

By Scott Grant

Little things

When I was a reporter, I covered a public meeting in which one of the participants objected to the use of the words “politicians” and “people” in the same sentence. He stood up and shouted, “Politicians aren’t people!” Then he squatted down, placed his hand a few inches above the ground and added, “They’re little things, way down here!” Then he stormed out of the meeting.

An extreme reaction, perhaps, but who hasn’t been disappointed by the rulers of this world? At best, they’re flawed just like the rest of us. At worst, they’re tyrants. We’ve all been let down. Nevertheless, there is something in the human experience that has never died: Hope for a better world. Men and women still go to the ballot box. Or they take up arms. Speaking to both our disappointment and to our hopes, the psalmists thunder: “The Lord reigns!” That’s the overarching theme of the psalms in the “YHWH Malak” (The Lord Reigns) style (Psalms 47 and 93-100).

Psalm 96, which celebrates the kingship of the Lord, summons all to submit to the reign of the Lord. The psalm was associated with the coming into Jerusalem of the Ark of the Covenant, which represented the presence of the Lord (1 Chronicles 16:23-33). It points beyond itself to the New Testament and leads us to consider the content of the gospel, the preaching of the gospel and the future of the gospel. Psalm 96:

**Sing to the LORD a new song;
Sing to the LORD, all the earth.
Sing to the LORD, bless His name;
Proclaim good tidings of His salvation from day to day.
Tell of His glory among the nations,
His wonderful deeds among all the peoples.**

**For great is the LORD and greatly to be praised;
He is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
But the LORD made the heavens.
Splendor and majesty are before Him,
Strength and beauty are in His sanctuary.**

**Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory of His name;
Bring an offering and come into His courts.
Worship the LORD in holy attire;**

Tremble before Him, all the earth.

**Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns;
Indeed, the world is firmly established, it will not be moved;
He will judge the peoples with equity.”
Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
Let the sea roar, and all it contains;
Let the field exult, and all that is in it.
Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy
Before the LORD, for He is coming,
For He is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
And the peoples in His faithfulness.**

Praise and proclamation (1-3)

The psalmist begins with a three-fold exhortation to all the earth to sing to the Lord. The verb “sing” is plural, so this is an exhortation to the inhabitants of the earth, not the earth itself. Exhortations to sing a “new song” are usually in response to acts of the Lord that demonstrate his reign. Such is the case here, as evidenced by verses 2 and 3 and the rest of the psalm.

The first three lines are an exhortation to worship the Lord. The second three lines are an exhortation to tell the peoples—the Gentiles—about the Lord. If the inhabitants of the earth are to worship the Lord, they must be told about the Lord.

The verb translated “proclaim good tidings” (*basar*) was used of a herald who would announce some kind of news. In the Hebrew scriptures, this news often concerns the victory that the Lord has won on behalf of his people (Isaiah 40:9, 52:7). The victory would demonstrate the power of the Lord. In Psalm 96, the news concerns the Lord’s salvation—some kind of deliverance that the Lord has brought about for his people. To proclaim such good news day to day means to do so on an ongoing basis.

The Israelites are to speak of the “glory” of the Lord, a word that is often used to convey his sovereignty. His “wonderful deeds,” which in a broad sense concern his work in creation and redemption, demonstrate his power; the Lord makes himself known through what he does. Here, it is incumbent upon the Israelites to tell the Gentiles what the Lord has done so that they may know who he is.

The inferiority of other gods (4-6)

Beginning with the word “for” in verse 4, the psalmist further explains why the Gentiles should worship the Lord and why the Israelites should tell the Gentiles about the Lord. First, the psalmist proclaims the greatness of the Lord, which makes him worthy of praise and worship.

Greatness cannot be attributed to the gods of the Gentiles, which are simply idols—carved images and the like that have no power. If you take away the image, there’s nothing there.

In contrast, the Lord demonstrated his power by creating the heavens. Some of the pagan gods were thought to reside in—and have influence over—the heavens. Why worship gods who claim to reside in the domain created by another God? Even if it were true that the other gods could somehow manipulate the heavens, why not worship the God who can manipulate the manipulators? The great claim of the Israelites was that they worshiped the Creator God. The other gods were therefore irrelevant.

Elijah demonstrated the irrelevance of Baal, who was thought to have power over the heavens. The 450 prophets of Baal could not awaken their god, but the Lord answered Elijah's prayer with fire from heaven. In response, the Israelites, who had been worshiping both the Lord and Baal, said, "The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God" (1 Kings 18).

The words "splendor," "majesty," "strength" and "beauty" convey the awesome sovereignty of the Lord through what can be seen in his sanctuary, or temple. Moses was given a vision of the Lord's heavenly temple so that the Israelites could pattern the earthly temple after it (Exodus 25:40). Both the heavenly temple and the earthly temple visibly displayed the Lord's sovereignty.

Although the psalmist may have one or both of those temples in mind, his reference to the Lord as creator may imply that he is thinking of creation as the Lord's sanctuary. The Lord tells Isaiah that creation is his temple (Isaiah 66:1-2). His splendor, majesty, strength and beauty can therefore be seen in what he has created. What can be seen is indicative of what can't be seen—the attributes of the Lord.

Recognizing the Lord's greatness (7-9)

In verse 7, the psalmist resumes calling the Gentiles to worship. Three lines begin with the words "ascribe to the Lord," just as the first three lines began with the words "sing to the Lord."

The Gentiles are now referred to as "families of the peoples," evoking the Lord's covenant with Abraham. The Lord told Abraham, "And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). The Lord designed the Abrahamic Covenant to rescue the families of the world through the family of Abraham and enfold all families into one family. The psalmist, then, is being true to the Abrahamic Covenant when he invites the inhabitants of the world to worship the God of Israel.

To "ascribe" to the Lord means to recognize and acknowledge his attributes. Once again, the Lord's royal attributes are in view: first his "glory and strength" and second "the glory of his name," which sums up the first two attributes.

While one could recognize the Lord's attributes from afar, the psalmist is not content to let the Gentiles remain distant from the Lord. Therefore, he invites them to come to the Lord's temple in Jerusalem, which was composed of various courts.

As the first stanza conveyed movement from singing to speaking, this stanza conveys movement from the worship of speech to the worship of actions. The Gentiles are to mirror their words with actions that befit the greatness of the Lord.

The “offering” would be akin to a gift given to a king to whom one was paying tribute. Literally, they are to worship the Lord “in the splendor of holiness,” which probably referred not to the clothes of worship but to the place of worship, the temple. The grandeur of the temple represented the holiness of the Lord. The word “holy” conveys the Lord’s transcendence, or “otherness,” particularly as it concerns his moral purity.

The temple became increasingly holy toward the center. The Lord dwelt in, and reigned from, the Holy of Holies, or Most Holy Place. In the psalmist’s view, even entering the outer courts of the temple should cause one to tremble with awe for being in the presence of the Lord.

The reign of the Lord (10-13)

The psalmist mines the first stanza again by exhorting the Israelites to address the Gentiles. The message is the essential proclamation of the Israelite herald, or preacher: “The Lord reigns” (*YHWH malak*). The messenger reporting news of victory in battle would make this proclamation. Isaiah envisions such a proclamation when he anticipates the Lord’s victory over Babylon, which will allow the exiles to return to Jerusalem, in Isaiah 52:7:

“How lovely on the mountains
Are the feet of him who brings good news
Who announces peace
And brings good news of happiness,
Who announces salvation,
And says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”

What does the Lord’s reign mean for the world? The verb translated “is firmly established” would be better translated “will be established,” just as the following phrase, “it will not be moved,” conveys a future fulfillment. The psalmist, then, is anticipating the firm establishment of the world. The Lord, when he fully expresses his reign, will put the world to rights and govern it. Nothing will threaten his rule. As king, he will judge the peoples of the world “with equity”—with inscrutable fairness.

The psalmist envisions creation itself erupting with joy at the prospect of the Lord’s reign. The heavens and earth personify the creation in a general sense, while the sea and the field personify it in a more particular sense. All of what the Lord himself has created, it seems, can’t wait to jump out of its seat.

What’s it waiting for? It’s waiting for the coming of the Lord to judge the earth and the world, which are further defined, once again, as “peoples.” The Lord is not coming to judge subhuman creation; he’s coming to judge the humans for which creation was made. His judgment is now depicted as being in “righteousness” and “faithfulness,” two attributes of the Lord that are often mentioned in connection with his covenant promises. The two words echo and amplify the “equity” of his rulings and ground them in the inner being of the Lord. Isaiah expected the Messiah, the Israelite king, to come to judge the world in righteousness and faithfulness (Isaiah 11:1-5).

Why should creation get excited about the coming of the Lord in judgment? Because, as the apostle Paul explains, it has been subjected to futility because of human sin. Humans failed in their roles as stewards of creation, so creation itself longs to be ruled rightly. That will happen when the Lord comes in final judgment and puts things right—and sets up his people to rule over creation. Creation, then, will fulfill its purpose in bringing glory to its Creator (Romans 8:19-22).

Content of gospel

The Lord has put a new song in our hearts. It's an old song, almost 2,000 years old now, in fact, but it's new every morning. Listen to the song of victory directed to the Lord Jesus Christ that the apostle John records in Revelation 5:9-10:

“And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals, for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.’”

We sing of the great victory that God has won in Jesus Christ over sin and death, which brings evil to its knees and sets the world free to serve God. It's new every time we appreciate it. It's an old song that never gets old.

What is the gospel announcement? In the Hebrew Scriptures, it's “The Lord reigns”: He has won a great victory and has begun to reign. In the New Testament, it's “Jesus is Lord”: Jesus the Messiah, the world's true king, has won a great victory and has begun to reign. Consider the first gospel sermon. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter preached to the Jews in Jerusalem about a king. He concluded it with these words: “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). The gospel challenges all rival kingdoms and serves notice that their time is up. Satan, the ancient foe of God, stakes claim to the world, manipulates its kingdoms for his purposes and inspires the worship of false gods.

The greatness of our God, as demonstrated in the gospel, shows the false gods to be just that: false. The gods of today, such as money, sex and power, present an image, just like the pagan gods of old. They say, “Here's what it looks like if you worship us. You'll have what you want; your fantasies will be fulfilled; you'll be in control. You can manipulate your world through us.” The gods are just idols: images. Take away the image, and there's nothing there. Those who worship such gods are worshipping nothing.

Where do we now see the reign of the world's true king? We see it in two places, or two temples, if you will. We see it in creation, and we see it in the church, the men and women who submit to God's reign. Nowhere else will we hear these words: “Jesus is Lord.” And when the demons hear these words, they tremble.

Preaching the gospel

The Septuagint, the first Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, translates the verb “proclaim good tidings” with *euangalizo* (evangelize), a word that appears frequently in the New Testament in

connection with “preaching the gospel.” To say “The Lord reigns,” or “Jesus is Lord,” or words to that effect, is to preach the gospel. To preach the gospel is to proclaim the lordship of Jesus Christ and to invite others to submit to him and enjoy the salvation that his victory brings over sin and death. We tell of the glory of the Lord, which is seen in the person of Christ. God accompanies the making of the announcement, and the telling of the story, with the power of his Holy Spirit, who is his royal presence in the world (Romans 1:17, 1 Corinthians 2:4-5, 1 Thessalonians 1:5-6).

Adhering to the words of the psalmist, we preach the gospel on an ongoing basis. We make Christ Lord in our hearts and are always ready, with gentleness and reverence, to tell anyone who asks us about the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15).

We invite all the earth to sing the song of God’s victory, for Jesus is Lord of all the earth. When you proclaim the gospel, you’re connecting with something both global and ancient. The gospel finds its fulfillment in the new covenant but was earlier expressed in God’s 4,000-year-old covenant with Abraham, in which he promised to bless all the families of the earth. In fact, the gospel begins earlier than that, in the garden, when the Lord promised Eve that one of her descendants would defeat Satan (Genesis 3:15). God wants to create through his gospel one family of all the earth’s families. In proclaiming the gospel, we’re inviting people to become part of God’s family.

Like the psalmist, we’re not content to let the unbelievers remain distant from the Lord. We invite them to come to the temple, the body of believers where Jesus dwells. He lives with us in a collective sense, but he also dwells in the Most Holy Place in each of us: our hearts. So we open up our hearts to them so that they may see Jesus. The royal presence of God is visible in us and among us, and we invite others to look for it.

Yet, we not only preach the gospel, we embody it. We embody the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—death, in that we suffer; and, resurrection, in that the Holy Spirit empowers us to persevere as we carry about “in the body the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Corinthians 4:10-11). We’re a living, breathing embodiment of the sacred story. Consider, once again, Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost. He was filled with the Spirit when he preached, and when he finished by proclaiming the lordship of the Messiah, those who heard him were pierced to the heart, and 3,000 of them were baptized (Acts 2:4, 36, 41).

Every once in a while someone asks me if I miss journalism. There are some things I miss. One of them is a day-in, day-out context for relationships with people who didn’t know Jesus. They always had misconceptions about followers of Jesus. Inevitably, whether I told them or whether they found out on their own, they became aware that I was follower of Jesus. Some of them were shocked. “Wait a minute!” a co-worker once said to me. “You have fun!” It was my pleasure to tell her, and others, about the king.

Future of the gospel

Some might recoil at the gospel’s having to do with judgment, but most certainly it does, and most certainly *it is* good news that it does. Paul speaks of the day when “according to my gospel, God will

judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus” (Romans 2:16). If the gospel is about a king, certainly we would expect it to include judgment. Certainly we would *want* it to include judgment. We would want the world to be firmly established and not be moved. In other words, we would want the world to be put to rights. We want it to be governed flawlessly, with equity, righteousness and faithfulness. We want a world of justice, peace and order. For such a world to be born, we need God himself, in the person of the divine and human king, Jesus the Messiah, to consummate his reign.

Even if you manage to elect the most righteous people as your leaders, you know that they are seriously flawed, that they govern in a world that is seriously flawed and that they can be thrown out of office in the next election. In the United States, we undergo a national convulsion every four years, and everyone alternately panics or rejoices when even a Supreme Court justice retires.

I was riding on a train to San Francisco last month when it came out that President Bush was going to announce his nomination for Supreme Court justice later in the day. The person sitting behind me was in a panic and made more than 20 phone calls in 30 minutes, calling acquaintances just to tell them to tune into the news to hear the announcement.

Praise God that at this point in history in our part of the world, we’re not fighting wars to see who gets to rule the country (although we are fighting a war in another part of the world to see who gets to rule another country). We have some friends here with us today from Pakistan whose president came to power in a coup and whose life is under constant threat. If he’s assassinated, who knows what will happen to that country.

We need to know, despite what may seem like evidence to the contrary, that the kingdom of God has broken into this world, that King Jesus has begun to reign and that he will consummate his reign. Nothing threatens his rule. When he brings to consummation his eternal kingdom, all will be well with the world, and there will be no question about it. Satan and the kingdoms that he manipulates will meet their final doom.

Part of the problem when we talk about judgment is that people think of God as not so different than the rulers of the world—harsh, domineering and punitive. In other words, they think of him as a tyrant. But the message of the scriptures is that when the king comes in judgment, it’s the tyrants of the world who should be worried, for righteousness and faithfulness will be the laws of the land.

The Triumphal Entry

On the one hand, the hope of Psalm 96 is fulfilled by the coming of King Jesus into Jerusalem, which is commonly called the Triumphal Entry. On the other hand, the Triumphal Entry includes within it hope for what we might call the Triumphal Return, when the king consummates his reign.

When Jesus came to Jerusalem as its king, some people made a carpet for him composed of leafy branches that they had cut from the fields (Mark 11:8). And why not, for “all the trees of the forest will sing for joy” at the coming of the Lord? Creation gets into the act, both in Psalm 96 and in the Triumphal Entry, because, in a sense, it longs for the same thing we do: the righteous reign of the world’s true king.

When Jesus came the first time, Jerusalem rejected its king. But when he comes again, we who long for his appearing will receive him with open arms, and we will sing to the Lord a new song. The Lord reigns!

Let us pray for the Holy Spirit to empower us to worship the king and proclaim to the world that Jesus is Lord.

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