

# THE LORD REIGNS



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Psalm 99

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## *Psalm 99*

I love road trips—short, spontaneous ones, and epic ones. For me, the road trip is a vacation genre. I've done five cross-country road trips in my life. Three of them have been with my mother, Pam.

One time mom and I took a road trip from California to Ohio. It's day two and I'm cruising down the Utah highway, singing along to the radio. I go over a big hill and my mom suddenly gasps. Instantly, my heart starts racing and my hands tighten on the wheel. I think wildlife is about to jump in front of our car and we may meet our Maker. And then mom exclaims, "Look at that view! Oh, Corrie, isn't that just beautiful!" The breath I'd been holding wheezes out of me. The adrenaline fades and my arms go limp on the steering wheel. The relief that we were safe quickly gives way to annoyance.

I probably said something sassy like, "Mom, don't do that! You almost killed us with that beauty." But she didn't listen. My mother gasped her way across two states. Every corner I took, every horizon we met, brought a new vista that stole her breath. Sometimes her hands would raise to her cheeks and tears would fill her eyes. And then it was— "How could anyone see beauty like that and claim there isn't a God?" Or— [gasp] "Oh, it's just so beautiful!"

Each time I'd agree with her and then kindly remind her that I was driving and sudden loud noises could endanger our lives. By day three I threatened to buy her a thesaurus so she could find another word for 'beautiful.' She simply said that there was no word that could possibly describe what she was seeing. Beautiful was the best she could do.

Have you ever had a Pam-in-Utah moment? An experience so incredible that it took your breath away? A moment that both filled you with awe and made your hands shake? Maybe for you it was a beautiful view you saw on a hike; or the first time you met your child; or the final hours spent by your loved one's bedside as they were dying. Sometimes there are just no words for the things we experience.

I think I know why we get tongue-tied. It's because we see or experience true beauty, but that beauty points toward something greater, something not quite of this earth. I think in these moments, we catch a glimpse of God's holiness. God's holiness is so great, so complete, so pure and bright, that we can only handle the shimmer along its edge.

Last week we talked about the idea of kingship, and we specifically looked at God's reign as the great king of Israel. We learned that God is a giving king who blesses his people, but we didn't see every quality of his reign. Today, we will listen to Psalm 99, and see snapshots of God as a majestic, just, and responsive king, all wrapped up in his holiness. These snapshots will lead us to praise God, but we might not be fully satisfied, because we can only begin to comprehend his holiness.

Please open your Bible and turn to Psalm 99. I encourage you to leave your bibles open in your laps because I will refer back to the text throughout the morning. Follow along as I read.

## **Psalm 99:1-9**

**The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! <sup>2</sup>The LORD is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. <sup>3</sup>Let them praise your great and awesome name! Holy is he! <sup>4</sup>The King in his might loves justice. You have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. <sup>5</sup>Exalt the LORD our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he! Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel also was among those who called upon his name. hey called to the LORD, and he answered them. <sup>7</sup>In the pillar of the cloud he spoke to them; they kept his testimonies and the statute that he gave them. <sup>8</sup>O LORD our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings. <sup>9</sup>Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the LORD our God is Holy!**

This is a song written for the corporate worship of the Israelites. The tone is joyful and celebratory. The poetic lyrics give us snapshots of God. Look at the text and notice the repetition of these words: *exalt*, *praise* or *worship*, and *holy*. You can see them in verses 2 and 3, verse 5 and verse 9. This repetition divides the psalm into three sections, making each like a single verse in a modern song. Each section focuses on a different aspect of God's reign and crescendos toward a declaration of God's holiness. Let's focus first on verses 1 through 3.

The very first line, "The Lord reigns" calls up the image of God's kingship. Biblical poets often use parallel language to advance an idea. Notice the language in line three, "he sits enthroned." So first we imagine God as king, and then the image expands to him enthroned, "upon the cherubim."

Cherubim are heavenly, winged creatures. In the Old Testament, they guard first the tree of life in the Garden of Eden, and later the Holy of Holies in the Temple. When God instructed the Israelites to make the Ark of the Covenant, he had them mount golden cherubim on the lid, their wings stretching inward. And in the time of the prophets, Ezekiel had a vision of the throne room of God where "the glory of the Lord went up" from the cherubim, and the sound of their wings was like "the voice of God Almighty when he speaks (Ezekiel 10:4-5)." Imagine that!

The first three verses of Psalm 99 give us a snapshot of God on his throne, surrounded by his heavenly guard. Like a Pam-in-Utah moment, there aren't adequate words for this vision. It's such an incredible sight to behold, it's so breathtaking, that the natural response is for things to shake.

In California, we know about earthquakes. We know that huge tectonic plates have to shift to generate an earthquake. **Or** it just takes the sight of the heavenly king on his throne.

This mighty king is the Lord, the God whose very name reveals his greatness. In verse 3 where it says "praise your great and awesome name", the word "awesome" comes from the verb *to fear*. Yes, God's name "I AM" is awesome in the sense that inspires awe, but it's more than that. God's name points to a mysterious greatness so far beyond human things, that we can hardly bear it.

The only word I can think of that is big enough to describe the vision in verses 1–3 is *majestic*. Because he is God and all-powerful, he reigns not just over Israel—he is exalted over all the peoples of the earth.

God is a king like no other. He is matchless in his majesty. I imagine it's like the sun.

When you were a kid, did you ever try to stare at the sun? Me too. The sun's brilliance draws our eyes. Its power makes us feel a sense of wonder. But if we stare at the sun too long, it will make our eyes tear. It has the power to blind us. This is God's majesty in Psalm 99. But the majesty that we see...I think it's just a shimmer of his holiness.

I'd like to pause for a moment and ask you to use your imagination. Call up the picture of God that most often appears in your mind.

Do you have it? Now hold onto that image and answer these questions: Where is God? What does God look like? What is God doing? How does this image make you feel? Now set this image beside the snapshot of the majestic king in Psalm 99. How do these images compare? Alright, exercise complete.

I suspect that if I took a poll, most of us usually picture the warm, approachable images of God. When I picture God, I almost always see him as Jesus. He's sitting beside a quiet stream in the middle of a dense forest. I sit beside Jesus, and like I do with most friends, we talk for a long time. We laugh loudly and I lean in when he shares wisdom about life. I feel safe and comfortable with him.

Now, there's nothing wrong with a picture like this. Jesus shared daily life with his disciples. He called them friends. His love and compassion drew people to him and made them feel safe. But God is more faceted than the earth's most precious diamond. God is not just a friend, a wise father, a loving shepherd—God is a majestic king.

I know that many of you have a deep and abiding love for God. I know that you praise God more often than Sunday mornings. But I want to challenge you to praise God for his majesty. Don't only worship God because he is approachable and loving, worship him because just the *sight* of him can make the earth quake! How might God's majesty change the way you worship him? You can discuss that one over lunch.

Let's turn to verses 4 and 5. Verse 4 is a simple declaration of God's character, but with an echo. In these four lines we learn about the Lord's justice. As you might imagine, the word justice in the Old Testament is associated with God's law and judgment. The words "equity" and "righteousness" add a moral sense; they point to the uprightness of God's character. Psalm 99:4 gives us a snapshot of God reigning as a lover of justice.

We need to be careful not to mix up God's justice with the cold and clinical legal system we know. Our system might aim for justice, but it's imperfect. Sometimes our laws allow the guilty to go free. Sometimes our laws fail to protect victims. We can easily be dissatisfied with the American justice system. But God's justice does not have loopholes. His laws do not exploit victims.

Psalm 99 isn't an action shot of God's justice; it's a declaration, so we have to look elsewhere for an example of justice on the move. Here's a great one from **Deuteronomy 10:17-18**"

**For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.**

You may remember from studies in Deuteronomy that God set up laws to protect the powerless and the vulnerable among Israel. God's love for justice is so big, that it extends beyond his people to bless even the stranger or foreigner in need.

We saw God's justice in action this summer as we studied the book of Ruth. Ruth was a foreigner, a gentile, and a widow who came to Israel with nothing but a bitter mother-in-law. Boaz followed God's law and provided for her. He allowed Ruth to glean from his field so she could eat. He married her and became her kinsman redeemer so she would have a home and a child.

This is where the Lord's justice leads—to provision, and redemption, and a sure future. Psalm 99:4, "The king in his might loves justice." This is such good news in a world full of injustice. It makes the Psalmist sing, "exalt the Lord our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he!"

Last week, we printed Leviticus 11:45 on the front of the bulletin. That verse ends with the command, "be holy, for I am holy." God's people are to be set apart for God. They are to walk in his ways, not the ways of the world. Those who do, have a shimmer about them that draws the eyes of others. Moses had this shimmer. So did Deborah, Boaz, Hannah and her son Samuel, and many others.

If you worship the lover of justice, then *you* are called to be an agent of justice in the world. Making justice for the powerless and vulnerable is a beautiful act of worship. There are probably a thousand ways to do justice in our culture and please the Lord. I think

the path of justice starts at the intersection of these questions: who is vulnerable around me; and how might I intercede?

A strand of God's justice that calls to me is protecting vulnerable children. Did you know that there are over 400,000 children in foster care in America? A quarter of those children are available for adoption, *today*. The statistics were about the same in 2008 when I lived in Pennsylvania. Back then I kept hearing radio ads about the number of children in shelters and the urgent need for foster parents. This tugged at me. So I went to an informational meeting to hear more and see if there was some way I could help. Later that year I became a certified foster parent. I hope to do the same here in California in the coming years. This is a way that I will do Godly justice in our community.

Your way may not be my way. Justice can be a one-moment act, as simple as sharing a meal with a hungry person. How can you worship God through justice? Remember it starts with these questions: who is vulnerable around me; and how might I intercede? You can talk about that over lunch too!

Let's turn to the final section of this song, verses 6 through 9. The theme here is call and response—a human call goes up to God and God answers. Notice who is doing the calling: Moses, Aaron, and Samuel. The reference to them as priests is obviously not in the strictest sense. Only Aaron served as a priest in the tabernacle. The Psalmist is alluding to their role as intercessors for the Israelites. They stepped in when the people sinned corporately and God grew angry. Their call was usually a cry for mercy, like the time Moses pleaded for God's mercy when the Israelites made the golden calf.

Psalm 99:8 sums up God's response to those who call him. The snapshot here is of God as a forgiving avenger. Let that sink in. This is a challenging image. How can God be both forgiver and avenger? How could the image of God as *avenger* lead people to worship him? Those are good questions. Let's try to work them out.

I think most of us have a good understanding of God's forgiveness and we can think of many Bible stories as examples. I think our understanding of biblical vengeance is murky, and it's muddied even more by the entertainment industry's over-the-top pictures of violence.

In the Bible, vengeance is about punishment for things understood as wrong, an appropriate response to evil. In the Old Testament, this word shows up as

God punishes foreign nations who oppress Israel, or as he punishes wicked individuals. But his vengeance isn't limited to outsiders. Did you notice the target in Psalm 99:8? It's the Israelites!

There are a few places in both the Old and New Testaments that talk about God's vengeance against his people. It's critical that we remember the context: God and his people are in a covenant relationship. God chose them to be his people, set apart for divine purposes. He gave them a law to live by so they could be holy like him, but they break God's law—knowingly; they sin—constantly. The good news is that God loves his people. He is *absolutely* committed to them in this covenant, so he forgives. But he also punishes them.

Perhaps the most famous example is from Numbers 20. There, God gave Moses specific instructions about *how* to perform a miracle and Moses did it his own way. God was not pleased. In Numbers 20:8, God says to Moses, "Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them." God doesn't demote Moses from leadership or banish him from Israel. God forgave Moses and allowed him to continue leading, but God punished Moses' sin by withholding the reward of the Promised Land.

Let's be real. We might be okay with stories where God punishes truly wicked people, but how many of us want to spend a lot of time thinking of God as an avenger of his own people? We don't want to go there because somewhere down the line that means we're included.

A wise man I know, a pastor named Paul Taylor, once preached:

*"Punishment is an important part of justice... We are deeply skeptical of anger and punishment... because we have often seen anger become hatred. Punishment often becomes revenge. But anger does not have to turn into hate. And the vengeance of justice is different than the revenge of passion."*

This revenge of passion litters the movie industry. You know the story—a protagonist or hero experiences a personal tragedy and then he goes on a bloody, hate-filled rampage. These movies are so violent that they are almost impossible to watch—or they should be. But the way the story is told, the revengeful hero is good. His violence is unquestioned. Sometimes it's even glorified as beautiful music plays over a killing scene.

Denzel Washington is one of my favorite actors. In 2004 he starred in a movie called *Man On Fire*. Denzel is the bodyguard for a little girl, the adorable Dakota Fanning. When the girl gets kidnapped, Denzel goes wild. He goes after the crime family who took her. He tortures man after man, cutting off fingers, and doing other unspeakable acts of violence. When the credits started rolling I started weeping. I was horrified by what I had seen. *Man on Fire* portrayed a passionate, hate-filled revenge, but spun it as justified vengeance.

I think we've muddied God's vengeance with Hollywood revenge. We often picture God as a man on fire. We need to disconnect these two images. We can't let culture, or Hollywood, or any other unholy thing dictate our understanding of God.

When we hear the Psalmist call God avenger, we must hold on to the link between punishment and justice. God is the lover of justice. Because he is holy, he can't be anything but just. God punishes when sin is clear. Because he is just, we can trust that God's punishment will fit the sin. And we need to trust that the lover of justice has plans for our redemption.

Psalm 94 has insight for us. Flip over there if you'd like. It's not far. It begins with, "O LORD, God of vengeance" and then verses 12 through 15 say this:

**"Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O LORD, and whom you teach out of your law, to give him rest from days of trouble, until a pit is dug for the wicked. For the LORD will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage; for justice will return to the righteous, and all the upright in heart will follow it."**

God forgives sinners because he loves them. God punishes people he loves because he has a plan to lead them back to righteousness. If you are a parent, you probably get this a bit easier than the rest of us. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you discipline your children not because you want to hurt or alienate them, you do it to teach them right from wrong *so they can thrive*.

God is both forgiver and avenger, a lover of sinners and a lover of justice. It's this precise combination of love and justice that makes God good.

I talked this out with Jake Dodson this week. Not only is he into music, he knows tons about film and literature—a true renaissance man. Jake was talking about comic book characters and the difference between revenge and vengeance and he said this,

“Because God is both loving and just, he is the only one who can resist the revenge cycle.” That’ll preach! God is holy. He is beyond human things. He cannot be corrupted by what might corrupt us. And this snapshot of God as forgiving avenger makes the Psalmist sing, “Exalt the LORD our God...for the LORD our God is holy!” (Psalm 99:9).

Are you there yet? Are you ready to praise? If not, consider this. The ultimate action shot of God as forgiving avenger is Jesus on the cross.

Friends, you know that the just punishment for sin is death. By the testimony of God’s word we know that anyone who disobeys or rejects God is guilty. By God’s standards, none of us should be forgiven; we should all be executed. But here’s the good news: God loves us so much that he sacrificed his perfect son on our behalf. Jesus bore our sin and shame up on the cross. He took our punishment and died so we don’t have to!

This is great news; there is forgiveness! Because of Jesus, we can have eternal, abundant life with God. All we have to do is repent of our sin, receive his forgiveness, and follow him!

If nothing else does, this should move us. The majestic, justice-loving, forgiving avenger of Psalm 99 is the sacrificial savior of the gospels. This God is king of heaven and earth, and the loving Jesus, the one who wants reign in our hearts. The most important encouragement I can give you today is simple: worship the Lord our God, for the Lord our God is Holy!

We’re about to worship God through music. Here you are welcome to sing at the top of your lungs, to play your instrument with gusto, to raise your hands toward heaven; those are all ways to worship God. But when you leave this building today, there are probably a thousand ways you can worship, and please the Lord.

You can offer your work as an act of worship. Whether you’re an engineer, and musician, a doctor, a stay-at-home mom, a teacher, a retiree—whatever you do—it can be done to the Lord.

You can worship God through your relationships. The love, joy, patience and kindness you offer to others will be a pleasing aroma rising to heaven. Don’t just worship God on Sunday in *one* way, find many ways to worship God, every day. There’s another thing to talk about over lunch.

We’ve seen some powerful images today. We’ve unpacked some big ideas like justice and vengeance. I did my best to find language big enough to describe the heavenly king. But when we talk about God, when we really start to see him, words will always fail us. I don’t think there is human language sufficient to describe this great king. But today, maybe we’ve caught a glimpse of his holiness. Maybe we saw just the shimmer along the edge of his robe.

#### (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Paul. *Tenacious Through Turmoil*. Palo Alto, CA: Discovery Publications, 2015. Print.