

Series FolkSongs of Faith

This Message All People Are Called to Acknowledge the LORD

Scripture Psalm 96

I hope you are finding the study of this series of Psalms to be encouraging. We are looking at them with “eschatological eyes,” that is, from the standpoint of the Lord’s return at end of the age. This should provide us with hope and confidence, assuming we have a close personal relationship with the LORD. It should also strengthen our resolve to live as we should in this present evil age, because believers need a strong resolve to stand up under the pressures of our culture which does its best to get us to conform to its mold and pattern, and away from the lifestyle which is pleasing to God.

The Psalms we are studying highlight the sovereignty and majesty of Yahweh, the LORD. There is a theme of celebration and rejoicing which builds with each Psalm. At the end of the age, those who love the LORD, who have placed their faith in Him, who are identified as the “upright in heart,” will be filled with exuberant unrestrained joy as they approach the LORD and then bow before Him in thankful worship and adoration.

Psalm 96 is a call to praise the LORD. In verses 2 and 3, the people are urged to “proclaim the LORD’s salvation” and to “declare his glory among the nations.” For this reason, this Psalm is closely identified with evangelism and global missions outreach. This is certainly a legitimate interpretation because the followers of Jesus have a responsibility to take the good news of salvation to all people groups in the world.

However, in my opinion, the Psalm has a different focus. The first verse refers to “a new song,” a song that people from all over the world will share. As we read, I think you will recognize how this Psalm fits into the “flow” of the Psalms we have studied previously.

Read Psalm 96

There are some interesting characteristics we can note about the structure of the poetry. There are two sections: verses 1 through 6 and verses 7 through 13. The phrase “sing to the LORD” is repeated three times at the beginning of the Psalm. In the middle of the Psalm the phrase “ascribe to the LORD” is repeated three times. The word “ascribe” means to “give” or “offer.” This does not imply that we must give something to God that He is lacking. Rather, the idea is that we are to offer to God the quality of worship that is commensurate with His infinite majesty and glory.

The reason for the singing is given in verses 4 through 6. The key thought is, “For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise.” The reason for the ascribing of glory to the LORD is explained in verses 10 through 13. He is the King who comes to judge the people. As verse 13 states: “he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in truth.” That’s a quick overview of the message of the Psalm.

This Psalm has a historical context which will help us to interpret it in a meaningful way. In the historical book of I Chronicles is the report of King David bringing the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. To commemorate that occasion, David provided to the court musicians a long poem which included most of the words of this Psalm. (*The story of the ark is given in I Chronicles chapters 13, 15, and 16 and also II Samuel 6*).

The ark was the most important article in the tabernacle, which was originally built in the time of Moses. The ark was a box. On top was a lid which was called “the Mercyseat.” The “Mercyseat” was the place where God said He would center His presence among the people. The ark was normally in the inner room of the tabernacle, but, on one occasion, the Israelites foolishly took it with them into battle and it was captured by the Philistine army. When it was returned to the Israelites, it was taken to the house of a priest named Abinadab, where it remained for a period of time.

After David established Jerusalem as the capital city of Israel, he set up a tent there to house the ark. The first attempt to move the ark to Jerusalem was not successful. Three more months went by before the preparations to bring the ark into the city were completed.

It was a great day of celebration as the priests carried the ark into the city accompanied by a multitude of musicians, the elders of Israel, and many many Israelites. The verse which summarizes the occasion states: “So all Israel brought up the ark of the covenant of the LORD with shouts, with the sounding of ram’s horns and trumpets, and of cymbals, and the playing of lyres and harps” (*I Chronicles 15:28*). King David was among those who danced and celebrated.

This was a very special occasion for the Israelites because the ark represented the presence of God among the people. God had promised to be “Immanuel,” — to be God dwelling among His people. For an unknown period of time, immediately following the creation of the universe, God was able to dwell with and have close interaction with His human creation. Unfortunately, the disobedience of Adam and Eve significantly restricted God from continuing that close fellowship. He was holy and the human race became sinful. The relationship was broken.

However, the construction of the tabernacle in the time of Moses, with its ark of the covenant, made it possible for God, in a small, mostly symbolic, way, to again be close to His people. The next very important step in the process of God reestablishing His presence on earth was the incarnation of Jesus. The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers was another very significant leap forward: when after Pentecost God dwelled with those who placed their faith in Jesus. The final step in the process will be the return of Jesus. His return will be accompanied with the judgment and destruction of all evil and the reestablishment for eternity of God’s presence with His redeemed and renewed people on this renewed and restored earth. These steps represented the unfolding process by which God could be “Immanuel,” “God with us.”

The celebration by the Israelites led by David is an example of the kind of celebration which will occur at the end of the age when God will once again have a literal presence on earth in the person of the Lord Jesus. It is my opinion that Psalm 96 is a description of that future time.

The celebrants at that time will have a new song to sing. As believers they will have been singing of their redemption and of the mercies of the LORD, and of His faithfulness in protecting them and providing for their needs, since their born-again experience. They will have been “blessing the LORD’s name,” “proclaiming his salvation,” and “declaring His glory among the nations” all through their years as believers on earth.

There is a time coming when they will “bless the LORD,” “proclaim his salvation,” and “declare his glory” in a new way. They will have a new song to sing, a song which will be sung in the very presence of the LORD Jesus, directly to Him. They will celebrate His “marvelous deeds.” Believers from every tongue, tribe, people group, and nation on earth will give testimony to what the LORD has done.

They will sing of the greatness of the LORD because, first and foremost, He will have revealed Himself as the LORD above all the gods of all the nations. Think about this: throughout human history, pagans have centered their faith on a variety of gods, but with the appearance of Jesus at the end of this age, it will become clear that all those human conjured up deities are “nobodies” — they are totally without any credibility. People have created their idols, but these products of human imaginations cannot be compared with the reality of the LORD. Pagans typically believe that their gods make their abode in the heavens, but, since the LORD is the creator of the heavens, He is the Source of all life and obviously greater than any pretenders to His sovereignty.

The words “splendor” and “majesty,” “strength” and “glory” describe the characteristics which surround the LORD in His dwelling place, His “sanctuary.” The word “sanctuary” is the poetic equivalent of the word “heavens.” This is another way of saying that all of creation is the temple, the dwelling place of God. The point here is that none of the gods of human imagination have characteristics or capabilities which are comparable to the awesomeness of the LORD, and that none of the false gods can have a place in the sanctuary of the one true God.

In the next section of the Psalm, the writer summons all the “families of the nations (literally “clans” or “tribes”) ... to ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name.” This means that believers from everywhere will have opportunity to gather in the “courts of the LORD” with their tribute offerings and to “worship him (literally “to bow before him”). They will come to express their appreciation for all the LORD has done and to declare their love and adoration to Him.

Note that they will worship the LORD “in the splendor of His holiness.” Believers understand that they are not able to be in the presence of the LORD clothed in their own righteousness, or through their own merits. Rather they must be enveloped in the splendor of the holiness of the LORD. The prophet Ezra prayed for mercy, “O LORD, God of Israel, you are righteous. Because of guilt, not one of us can stand in your presence” (*Ezra 9:15*).

Centuries later, the Apostle Paul wrote that Jesus cleansed the Church so “that he might present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (*Ephesians 5:27*). Paul also wrote that God “has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (*Colossians 1:22*).

The benediction I sometimes recite at the end of worship services states, “To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy, to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord” (*Jude 24*).

Believers are cleansed of sin by the blood of Jesus and “clothed with the righteousness from God which comes through faith in Jesus Christ. This righteousness is made available to all who believe and are thereby justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (*paraphrase of Romans 3:22, 24*). As a result, believers can stand in the presence of “the LORD in the splendor of his holiness.”

Believers can have confidence that they will be accepted when they approach Jesus, although they will undoubtedly approach Him with a racing heartbeat. I’m guessing that is what verse 9 is referring to by the word “tremble.” It is the attitude of reverent awe.

There are three great affirmations in verse 10. First, “the LORD reigns.” This means that He is King over everything.” Everything is His by right of creation. There are no challenges to His sovereignty.

This leads to the next affirmation: “the created world is firmly established and it cannot be moved.” More than the physical universe is meant by that statement. From the standpoint of the Scriptures, “the world” and “the kingdom of God” include both physical and moral aspects. Even before the start of the creation process, the purposes and intentions of Yahweh had been determined. His purposes and intentions are eternal in nature. Hence, they are “firmly established” and will not change. The powers of sin and chaos will never overcome His plans. All God has planned will be accomplished. This should be very reassuring to us.

Because the ways of Yahweh were firmly established at the beginning of human history and are unchanging, He is able to “judge the peoples with equity.” As the Apostle Paul explained, “what may be known about God is plain to them, for since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

Paul then explained the history of fallen humanity: “although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened” (*Romans 1:19-21*). People moved away from God; God did not change and neither did His plans.

Sovereignty, stability, and impartial judgment. These three affirmations will be the basis of Yahweh’s judgment at the end of the age. For non-believers, the outcome will be destruction because of their wickedness, but, for believers, the judgment will be the cause for joy.

We can understand why the people of God are excited about the time of judgment. They will no more be ridiculed, persecuted, and opposed by evildoers. Jesus announced to His disciples the kinds of experiences they would endure here on earth. He said, “a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me” (*John 16:2-3*). He also said, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ... If they persecute me, they will persecute you also. ... They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me” (*John 15:18, 20-21*).

Believers in many parts of the world experience difficult circumstances, even martyrdom, because of their commitment to Jesus. Just think about how happy the last surviving believers at the end of the age will be when the LORD exercises His justice on the earth. The LORD will “destroy evildoers because of their wickedness” (*Psalms 94:23*) and make “the righteous like a flourishing tree” (*Psalms 92:12-13*).

Not only will the people of God rejoice about the approaching judgment, but all of the universe will join them. Notice in verses 11 through 13 the mention of “the heavens,” “the earth,” “the sea and all that is in it,” the fields (the dry land) and everything in them,” and “the trees.” Literally everything in creation “will sing before the LORD for he comes, he comes to judge the earth.”

The physical creation is eager for the LORD's judgment to begin because it was as adversely affected by the disobedience of Adam and Eve as people were. Paul explained the situation this way: "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it in hope. For the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (*Romans 8:19-22*). That's why this Psalm declares that the heavens, the earth, sea, dry land, and all the trees of the forest will sing when the LORD appears to judge the earth, and they will sing just as enthusiastically as believers.

The Psalm concludes with the statement about how the LORD will judge when He comes: "He will judge the world in righteousness and the people in his truth." Back in verse 10, the writer stated that the LORD would judge with "equity." Equity means that God's judgment will be fair, impartial, without bias. Righteousness refers to God's perfect standard. He will not judge on the curve of human goodness, but according to the absolute standards of His holiness as revealed in His Word to us, His truth. The LORD's judgment will not be arbitrary or whimsical. He will judge each person accurately with perfect justice against His righteous standard.

That is a problem for people. They will never be perfect people this side of eternity, and, in and of themselves, they are not able to live up to God's standards of righteousness. Fortunately, God's righteousness can be imputed to them when they place their faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. The Apostle Paul explained: "A righteousness from God ... has been made known (to us). This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe ... and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (*Romans 1:21-24*). In Christ, therefore, believers "have been set free from sin. They reap the benefit of holiness and the result is eternal life" (*Romans 6:22*).

How should we live while we wait for Jesus' return? We must be a worshipping people. Our thoughts must often be on the greatness of God. We must be a witnessing people. If we are captivated by the majesty and splendor of God, we must be eager to tell others about Him.

We must be a faithful people. We don't know when the Lord will return, but we must be ready for whenever it will happen. We must not become distracted with all of the activities and cares of this world nor anxious about the persecution we might face as the followers of Jesus. Our lives must reflect our concern for the holiness of God.

The day is coming when Jesus will enter Jerusalem just as the ark entered the city in the time of David. At that time the true followers of Jesus will be much more excited than were the Old Testament Israelites.