

Series FolkSongs of Faith

This Message The Glory of the LORD is Revealed

Scripture Psalm 97

We don't know when most of the Psalms in this series were written. Some of them may have been recited by Hebrew worshipers when they gathered for special celebrations at the temple. After the temple built by Solomon was destroyed by the Babylonians and the Jews were taken into exile, these Psalms took on a deeper and more mysterious significance: the Jews found the references to the reign of Yahweh difficult to reconcile with their circumstances in a foreign country. At that time, when the faithful exiled followers of Yahweh recited the Psalms, they emphasized their hope and longing for Yahweh to rise up and change their status in the world.

After the exile, after the faithful remnant of Jews returned to their homeland, the Psalms took on yet another meaning and relevance. They could praise "the LORD, the great God, the great King above all gods" (*Psalm 95:3*) because He had proven His sovereignty over the gods of the Babylonians. They could look back and recognize the LORD's hand on them and proclaim, "You make me glad by your deeds, O LORD; I sing for joy at the works of your hands" (*Psalm 92:4*). However, for most Jews in the late centuries before the birth of Jesus, statements such as "You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday" (*Psalm 91:5-6*) did not ring true because the Jews were frequently impacted by the political ambitions and dominations of world powers.

After the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 A. D., the Psalms have continued to be a part of the Jewish liturgy through the centuries, but the hope and confidence in them by the Jews has been weakened. From the Jewish standpoint, Yahweh has not been reigning, life has been tenuous, and there has not been a lot by which they can be joyful.

Today, these Psalms we are studying have greatest significance for Christian believers. Looked at through eschatological eyes, and when combined with other Scripture passages, they add to the understanding of believers about the end of the age, an event all believers look forward to.

The most prominent theme throughout this group of Psalms is the sovereignty of Yahweh. Three of the Psalms in this group, including the one for today, begin with the words “The LORD reigns” (*Psalms 93, 97, 99*), and all of these Psalms emphasize that the ways of the LORD are firmly established and under His control. Believers recognize this because of their faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the promise of His return to earth, but the Jewish people do not have that perspective.

Psalm 96 ended with the statement “he comes, he comes to judge the earth” (*Psalm 96:13*). The Psalm we are focusing on today picks up on that topic and gives us a description of what the day of judgment will be like.

Read Psalm 97

Verse 1 begins with the affirmation of the reign of Yahweh. From the words used in the verse we can infer that the LORD has already commenced His rule over the earth. Certain events associated with the return of the Lord Jesus that had been anticipated in the previous Psalms are presented here as having happened, statements such as “His foes are consumed;” “all the peoples see his glory;” and idol worshipers “are put to shame.”

Let’s think for a moment about the “flow” of this series of Psalms. Psalm 90 ended with a prayer that the LORD would “relent, and have compassion on his servants” and change the circumstances of His people. Psalm 91 expressed praise and thankfulness for the LORD’s protection during the years in which wickedness and evildoers dominated life on earth. In Psalm 92 the people of God were anticipating the time when the enemies of God would be destroyed. Psalm 93 was an acknowledgement that God remained in sovereign control over His rebellious human creation, even though His control was mostly behind the scenes and out of sight of most people. Psalm 94 had a two-fold plea: that the Judge of the earth would rise up against the wicked, and that the wicked would get in right relationship to God before it was eternally too late for them. All these Psalms anticipated the return and reign of the LORD on earth. Each one moved us closer to the event known as “the parousia,” the appearance of Jesus on earth at the end of the age.

There was a change in the message of Psalm 95. The assumption in that Psalm was that the LORD Jesus had just returned to earth. The people of God were invited to come into His presence with exuberant singing and to bow before Him in humble adoration. In Psalm 96 the people of God were instructed to “sing a new song” of salvation and deliverance and to “declare the LORD’s glory among the nations.” They were to “come into his courts with a tribute offering” and to “worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness.”

Psalm 97 and the remaining Psalms in this series describe what will happen on earth immediately after His return. Jesus will assume His rightful status as LORD of the universe. The glory of God will be revealed to every person. All of the evil influences which originated with the disobedience of Adam and Eve will be suppressed. All those who had rebellious attitudes toward God will be destroyed.

Psalm 97 describes the two kinds of reactions of people to the LORD’s return. These effects can be summarized with two words: “delight” and “dismay.” Delight will be expressed by both creation and the people of God who were faithful to the end, but dismay by those who had not been worshipers of God.

The first verse of the Psalm informs us that the “reign” of Yahweh is reason for the whole earth to “be glad.” The references to “all the earth” including “the distant shores (or islands)” are a poetic way of saying that every part of the physical creation will be rejoicing.

In verses 2 through 6 the writer focuses on the rather frightening picture of what the reign of Yahweh will mean to wicked people. Their reaction will be one of “dismay,” especially when they will be confronted with the righteousness and justice of Yahweh.

Up until the age of the end, the glory of the LORD has to be shielded from human eyes. Just as storm clouds and darkness hide the sun, there have had to be “clouds and thick darkness” to veil the brilliance of God’s glory from human eyes. In the Old Testament, whenever God presented Himself to His people, He surrounded Himself with “clouds and darkness and fire.” It was necessary for God to cover Himself to prevent humans from looking on Him — from seeing Him as He really is.

Think about the Israelites encounter with the holy God at Mount Sinai. The LORD announced ahead of time through Moses, “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you.” Two days later “there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain.” The account in Exodus indicates that “Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace” (*Exodus 19:9, 16-18*). The people were afraid. Even Moses said, “I tremble greatly.” If the followers of Yahweh were terrified by the appearance of God then, just imagine what the reaction of non-believers will be at the time of the Parousia.

Later, when Moses asked to see the LORD’s glory (*Exodus 33:18*), the LORD agreed to let His “goodness pass in front of Moses and to proclaim His name to Moses.” However, He said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live,” and so the LORD put Moses in the cleft of a rock and covered him while He passed by.

The portrayal of the “clouds and thick darkness” which surrounded the LORD in this Psalm is exactly what the Old Testament prophets said would happen on “the Day of the Lord,” the day of judgment. For example, the prophet Zephaniah announced the words of the LORD to the people of Judah, “The great day of the LORD is near — near and coming quickly. Listen! The cry on the day of the LORD will be bitter, the shouting of the warrior there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness, ... I will bring distress on the people and they will walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the LORD. ... In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth” (*Zephaniah 1:14-18*).

According to Psalm 97, when the LORD appears some amazing events will take place. “Fire will consume his foes,” “the earth will be flooded with light,” “the mountains will melt like wax,” “the heavens will proclaim His righteousness,” and “all the peoples will see his glory.”

For unbelievers, the appearance of the LORD will be an especially dismaying time. In the visions given to the Apostle John in the book of Revelation, he saw “every mountain and island removed from its place,” and he reported that all non-believers will “call on the mountains and the rocks to fall on them and hide them from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!” (*Revelation 6:14-16*).

Fire is frequently used in Scripture as a metaphor for God's wrath and His all-consuming judgment (*see Deut 4:24; Ps 21:9; 50:3; 83:13-15; Isa 10:16-19*). Isaiah spoke of the future when he prophesied, "The LORD comes from afar, with burning anger and dense clouds of smoke; his lips are full of wrath, and his tongue is a consuming fire" (*Isaiah 30:27*). He also wrote, "The LORD will cause men to hear his majestic voice and will make them see his arm coming down with raging anger and consuming fire" (*Isaiah 30:30*).

When John the Baptizer confronted the religious leaders of his day, he spoke like an Old Testament prophet: "Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ... I baptize you with water for repentance, but after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (*Matthew 3:7, 11-12*). John was explaining that some people will receive the Holy Spirit and others will face the fire of judgment.

When the LORD Jesus is revealed at the end of the age, the intensity and brightness of His coming will "light up the world." This is similar to what Jesus told His disciples, "As lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man" (*Matthew 24:27*).

In all these phenomena, not only is the glory of the LORD revealed, but also the righteousness and justice of the LORD. Verse 2 declares that "righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne." Verse 6 states that "the heavens proclaim his righteousness." The verb in verse 6 indicates that "the heavens had already started the process of proclaiming his righteousness."

In one way the heavens have been revealing the glory of God since creation, but, with the coming of the LORD Jesus and with the wrath of God being manifested in judgment, there will a new level of intensity which has never previously occurred. Righteousness and justice are significant parts of the glory of God. Verse 7 indicates that "All the peoples will be made aware of this aspect of his glory."

In Psalm 96 we learned that the LORD “will judge the peoples with equity” (*Psalm 96:10*). The Old Testament followers of God could not fully understand that statement. The meaning became clear only after the sacrificial death of Jesus. We understand that the justice demanded by the Father was satisfied by the death of His sinless Son on the cross and that all individuals who place their faith in Jesus Christ are “justified freely (that is, as a gift) by his grace.”

The Apostle Paul explained that God chose this method of redemption in eternity past, before the creation of the worlds. Paul explained that God chose the sacrificial death of His Son to be the method by which He would “demonstrate his justice.” God wanted to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (*Romans 3:22-26*). The Father knew that sinful humans could not accomplish their own salvation. As sinners they only deserved death. The Father knew that only a perfect sinless human being would be qualified to die as a substitute for sinful humans, and so He sent His Son to earth to die a death that would be acceptable according to His heavenly standards. In this way, the justice of the Father was satisfied. He was both just in His actions and the Justifier of those who would place their faith in Jesus.

We can understand that God can be counted on to do what is right in all circumstances, even in judgment when “fire goes out before him and consumes his foes on every side.” He made it possible for every human who ever lived to place faith in Him. Unfortunately the majority of individuals throughout history have rejected the ways of God and rebelled against Him, and, as a result, they stand condemned to an eternity of separation from God. They will be judged “with equity.” God, because He is righteous, can be counted on to do what is right.

Another result of the “parousia” is in verse 7: “All who worship (and serve) images are put to shame.” The word “shame” can also be translated “disappointed” or “dismayed” or “humiliated.” The worthlessness and impotence of man-made idols, and the gods which the idols represent, will be revealed, once-and-for-all, by the appearing of Jesus, the One who is Most High over all the earth. The idols will not be able to deliver their worshipers from the wrath and judgment of the LORD.

The prophet Isaiah had some sarcastic comments about idols and the people who made them. He wrote: "The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. ... The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it in the form of man, of man in all his glory, that it may dwell in a shrine. ... He takes the wood of the tree. ... It is man's fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. Half the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, 'Ah! I am warm; I see the fire.' From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, 'Save me; you are my god.'"

Isaiah then gave his concluding assessment of idol worshipers in these words: "They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand" (*Isaiah 44:12-18*).

I would like to take a moment here to insert some comments about the idols that people have. People who are idolaters do not have to be religious. An idol can be any activity or ambition which takes the place of the LORD in a person's life. Jesus set forth the principle problem of idolatry in the Sermon on the Mount when He said, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money (Things)" (*Matthew 6:24*).

In his letter to the Ephesian Church the Apostle Paul wrote, "Of this you can be sure: no immoral, impure or greedy person has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Such a person is an idolater" (*Ephesians 5:5*). I would interpret Paul's statement this way: such people are obsessed with many things other than God. "Such a person is an idolater."

To the believers in the city of Colossians, Paul wrote: "Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming" (*Colossians 3:5-6*). Idolatry is described in Scripture as a deep self-centeredness, when the mind of the individual is set on earthly things, when personal fleshly appetites and desires are a higher priority than a relationship with the LORD.

In verses 8 and 9 the Psalmist begins the theme of “delight.” In the Old Testament, “Zion” was a substitute name for Jerusalem, the city conquered by David and developed by him as the capital of Israel. In a prophetic sense, “Zion” refers to the people of God who will dwell in the heavenly Jerusalem for eternity. The people of Zion and of the surrounding communities “are glad because of the judgments of the LORD.” They recognize that He is the Most High God over all the earth, that He is “exalted far above all gods.” As the reigning God, He is incomparable. He stands alone. He is judged by no one, yet He judges everyone with righteousness and justice.

This Psalm ends with a clear-cut practical application. Verse 9 should be the personal confession of every believer, and verse 10 should be the objective of every confessor. The specific command in verse 10 is “Let those who love the LORD hate evil.” Let me restate this command in another way: “Those who love the LORD must not engage in actions which are displeasing to the LORD.” This command is perfectly logical for those who sincerely want to meet the LORD at His coming. A believer cannot claim to love the LORD and at the same time deliberately cling to any sinful behaviors which are antithetical to the LORD’s holy nature. “To hate means to reject; to love means to choose. As believers, our goal is to become more and more like Jesus. It’s a choice we make.

If we sincerely seek to please God in all we do, we will receive from Him three blessings. First, the LORD will preserve/guard our lives, and will deliver us from the hand of the wicked (*verse 10*). This does not mean that we will never be physically injured or suffer or be killed at the hands of wicked people. God’s promise of deliverance is primarily spiritual. There have been and still are believers who are killed for their faith. The promise is that we cannot be separated from the infinite love of God for us in Christ even if enemies kill our bodies.

Secondly, The LORD will shed His light upon the righteous. The word “light” has several meanings in Scripture, and all of them are good and positive. We are informed that God dwells in light to which no man can approach (*I Timothy 6:16*). Jesus is referred to as “the light of men” (*John 1:4*) who brings the true knowledge of God to humanity (*John 1:9*). Light is used figuratively of holiness and purity. Light is also frequently used to explain the spiritual enlightenment which is provided by the indwelling Holy Spirit (*II Corinthians 4:6*). Light also represents life and salvation. God’s word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (*Psalms 119:105*). The second benefit provided to those who love the LORD is spiritual light.

And notice that the light which non-believers could not tolerate in the earlier verses of the Psalm can be “shed upon those who are righteous and upright in heart.” The end of the age will hold no terrors for those who have been living their lives in the light of God’s truth. They will be able to dwell in the full brilliance of God’s glory.

The third benefit is “joy,” which is “shed on the upright in heart.” Genuine godliness is a matter of the heart, which is described in Scripture as the innermost essence of a person. Whatever a person does willingly and deliberately is said to “come from the heart.” The heart is the center of thought, of desires, and of feelings and affections, and of choices of right and wrong. It is the place from which the Holy Spirit directs the behavior of a person. Those who are “upright in heart” are those who “love the LORD and hate evil,” who walk in obedience to the LORD, who are at peace with the LORD. The “upright in heart” enjoy the protection of the LORD in this life and eagerly anticipate being in His presence for eternity. They “rejoice in the LORD.”

Preservation, enlightenment, and joy. Verse 12 summarizes the attitude of those who are righteous. They are filled with praise for all the LORD provides to them. Remember, it is only “in the LORD” that people can rejoice. The vision that this psalm presents, of God coming to establish His kingdom, should move us to prepare ourselves for that great event.

Our prayer should be: “Send forth your light and your truth, O God, let them guide me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell. Then will I go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight. I will praise you, O God, my God.” (*Psalm 43:3-4*)