

## **Series FolkSongs of Faith**

### **This Message Joy to the World, the LORD Has Come**

#### **Scripture Psalm 98**

The title for this Psalm is deliberately chosen. In the year 1719 Isaac Watts, a very well-known Christian poet and theologian, used the text of Psalm 98 as the basis of the hymn "Joy to the World." We normally sing this hymn at Christmas time, but, if you look carefully at the words of the hymn, you will recognize that it says nothing about the birth of Jesus. Just like the Psalm which was its inspiration, Joy to the World is an eschatological hymn describing the return of Jesus at the end of the age.

As we read the Psalm, I want you to notice the expressions of joy which are either stated or implied in every verse. In this Psalm there are no comparisons with evil-doers, no instructions about righteous behavior. All is spontaneous joy and exhilaration.

#### **Read Psalm 98**

The first three verses mention several reasons for singing "a new song to the LORD." "He (the LORD) has done marvelous things," He "has made his salvation known," "He has revealed his righteousness," "He has remembered the house of Israel," "all the ends of the earth have seen his salvation."

We will agree that our salvation is a "marvelous thing." The word "salvation" appears three times in the first three verses. The references are all in past tense. This Psalm, like the two preceding it, presents the work of salvation as already accomplished. From the information in the preceding Psalms, we recognize that the LORD has taken up His reign on the earth. Because of His presence, the people of the LORD are exuberantly rejoicing, proclaiming his glory among the nations, and coming to Him in worship and adoration. These redeemed worshipers are beginning to realize the fullness of their salvation. They have been delivered from the threats and pressures of wicked people and will be with the LORD for eternity. This is the reason they are singing "a new song."

The word “salvation” has the connotation of “deliverance” and “victory.” The expressions “his right hand” and “his holy arm” are poetic metaphors for the LORD’s power and authority. This Psalm speaks of the His total victory over evil and the practitioners of evil. The words, “marvelous things,” speak of His personal, supernatural intervention in the lives of people on earth, bringing salvation to His people and destruction to evildoers.

Other prophecies in the Old Testament use similar words. For example, when Isaiah prophesied to the people of Judah, he said: “When the LORD returns to Zion, the people will see it with their own eyes. Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. He will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God” (*Isaiah 52:8-10*).

Not only was Yahweh making “his salvation known,” but He was “revealing His righteousness to the nations.” In previous Psalms we learned that the words “righteousness” and “justice” and “equity” have closely related meanings. There are also passages, such as this one, when “righteousness” and “salvation” are closely linked. “Salvation” is the experience of people who have been delivered from evil and their enemies of wickedness. “Righteousness” is the application of divine holiness. Yahweh is the dispenser of justice, the Giver of rewards to those who are obedient to His ways and of punishment to those who rebel against Him. The LORD’s salvation and His righteousness will both be fully revealed to the nations at the same time, at the time of His parousia, or appearing at the end of the age.

Verse 3 refers to the LORD’s “love and faithfulness to the house of Israel.” Yahweh made a comprehensive set of promises to Abraham concerning the future, promises which were repeated in later years to the other patriarchs of the Old Testament and to the nation of Israel. To Abraham God said, “This is my covenant with you: you will be the father of many nations ... I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you” (*Genesis 17:4-7*).

The covenant promises of Yahweh were renewed with the Israelites after their rescue from Egypt. At Mt. Sinai the people accepted the words of the covenant as found in the Ten Commandments (*Exodus 34:27-28*). The covenant was renewed at several other times in Jewish history — to the generation of Israelites just before they entered the promised land, to the tribes of Israel near the end of Joshua’s life, to several of the kings of Israel, and to the people who returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile (*see Deuteronomy 29; Joshua 24; II Chronicles 15, 23, 29, 34; Ezra 10; Nehemiah 9-10*). Finally, in a general sense, the terms of the covenant were fulfilled by Jesus in the New Testament.

Historically, the Jews did not consistently follow the ways of the LORD. The apostle Paul described them as “zealous for God, but with a zeal that was not based on knowledge. They did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own,” and, as a result, “they did not submit to God’s righteousness” (*Romans 10:2-3*). However, the promise of God is that “there is a remnant (of the Jews who are) chosen by grace” (*Romans 11:5*), and, “they are loved on account of the Patriarchs, for God’s gifts (of grace) and his call is irrevocable” (*Romans 11:28-29*).

And so, at the end of the age, the LORD will remember His love and His faithfulness to the house of Israel, and a remnant of Jews will be saved along with many Gentiles. What the LORD will do for the Jews at that time is part of the marvelous works of salvation and righteousness which will be revealed to the nations.

From these three verses, I think we can understand the reasons for the “new song” which will be sung by the followers of the LORD Jesus. The old songs sung by believers, both Jews and Gentiles, will be inadequate to express the feelings which will spring from within them when they realize that the influence of sin is removed, that they are in the physical presence of Jesus, their Savior and Lord, and that they stand pure and holy and are clothed with immortality.

The reference to “the new song” implies that there was an earlier song. There indeed was another time in the Old Testament in which the people of God sang about salvation and deliverance, and we will be better able to understand this Psalm if we relate it to that “previous song.” For this background we must go back to the book of Exodus and think about the parallel experiences of God’s people.

The experience of the Hebrew people in Egypt was very difficult. They were slaves to Pharaoh, and compelled to forced labor. Scripture informs us that “their lives were bitter,” and that “in all their hard labor the Egyptians used them ruthlessly” (*Exodus 1:11, 14*). Yahweh called Moses to be His representative to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. “The LORD said, ‘I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey’” (*Exodus 3:7-8*). And Yahweh said to the Israelites: “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. ... I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (*Exodus 6:7-8*).

I’m not going to take the time now to give any details about how Yahweh accomplished the release of His chosen people. I am sure that you know about the 10 plagues which devastated the land of Egypt. I’m sure you know about the protection extended to the Israelites during those plagues. They did not suffer any of the adverse conditions which affected the Egyptians. I’m sure you know about the Passover night in which the Israelites put the blood of a sacrifice on the doorposts and lintels of their houses, thus preserving the lives of first born males when, at midnight, the angel of the LORD passed through the land and struck down all the firstborn of the Egyptians. That was the final action which convinced Pharaoh to let the Israelites exit their land of slavery and misery.

All of this was cause for celebration among the Israelite people, but there was even more. By the time the people were approaching the body of water which stood between them and the Sinai Peninsula, the Egyptians officials had changed their minds about the lost services of their former slaves. The officials set off in pursuit of them with all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and troops. You know about the miracle of the crossing of the sea. Moses told the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. ... The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still” (*Exodus 14:9, 13-14*).

Then “when Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, ... the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land ... and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.” When the Egyptians followed the Israelites into the sea, the waters flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen, and the entire army of Pharaoh. Exodus 14 informs us that “not one of them survived” (*Exodus 14:21-28*).

Just imagine the joy of the Israelite people at that time. They had seen “the great power of the LORD.” The LORD had protected them, and delivered them from the most powerful nation on earth. Their response was a song to the LORD. These are some of the words they sang: “I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea. The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him. ... Your right hand, O LORD, was majestic in power. Your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy. In the greatness of your majesty you threw down those who opposed you. You unleashed your burning anger; it consumed them like stubble. ... In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling. The nations will hear and tremble; anguish will grip the people” (*Exodus 15:1-18*).

That song of salvation and deliverance was sung by the Israelites following their exodus from Egypt. Psalm 98 describes the song of the new exodus which will occur at the end of the age. That will be the occasion in which the LORD leads His people out of this present world into their heavenly promised land. The exodus from Egypt set the pattern of deliverance and redemption. The future exodus will be the time in which the LORD will take His people to Himself and will be their God for eternity. This new rescue effort at the end of the age will be much more significant than that experienced by Moses and the Israelites. The coming ultimate salvation will demand new music and new worship.

The second part of the Psalm gives us instructions about “how” to praise the LORD. “All the earth” is to be involved. To begin with, the people of earth will “shout for joy.” The type of “shout” referred to here is like the sound of triumph over enemies at the end of battle. The victory of the LORD over all His enemies will cause the people of God to “burst into jubilant song with music.”

The shouting and singing is to be accompanied with an array of instruments: harps, trumpets, ram's horns. I can't imagine that this will be a well organized or well rehearsed ensemble. Any kind of noisemaker might be used to contribute to the celebration. And for individuals who will be without noisemakers, there is the opportunity to "shout for joy." [I'm sure there will be many shouts on the order of "Hip, hip, hurray," and maybe a few cheers, "Two, four, six, eight, Who do we appreciate?" (Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!)] All of the "music"/noisy sounds will be presented "before the LORD, the King" who will have taken up His rule.

The first two sections of the Psalm focused on "why" the people of God will sing to the LORD and "how" they are to sing. In the final section of the Psalm, the focus is on "who" will be involved in the praise activities, and it's not just people. The "sea" is mentioned, along with "everything in it," and also the "world and all who live in it." In other words, all living creatures as well as the physical creation will participate in the celebration. As Creator, the LORD made all things physical, animate and inanimate. As sovereign LORD, He has dominion over all that exists. As the Redeemer King, He will remove all the contamination of evil and restore all creation.

In verse 8 the "rivers" will be like people; they will "clap their hands." And the mountains will "sing for joy." [*How's that for poetic metaphors.*] Everything in and on the earth will rejoice because of the coming time of judgment. Why will this be? Because the physical creation was subjected to the consequences of sin just like the human race. The earth did not bring the consequences of sin on itself because of its disobedience. Rather, the fault lay on Adam and Eve. The Apostle Paul explained: "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 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (*Romans 8:19-21*).

This is why the physical creation, along with the followers of God, will all participate in the celebration of the LORD's return. All the consequences of sin which have defaced our natural environment will be removed. Both the people of God and His material creation will be restored to the pristine purity and glory they had before the disobedience of Adam and Eve.

Psalm 98 ends with three powerful parallel statements. The LORD “comes to judge the earth,” “He will judge the world in righteousness,” and “He will judge the peoples with equity.” We’ve read these statements previously in the earlier Psalms. The repetition gives us the assurance that the LORD will return, and that He will use His attributes of righteousness and impartiality to judge the world and the human race. Everything will be set right. When this happens, believers, along with the natural world, will together celebrate in praise of the LORD. The celebration will be similar to the “victory” song of Moses and Israel, but with much more enthusiasm and gratefulness. In both instances, the LORD “triumphed gloriously; “His right hand got the victory” and “He made known His salvation to all people.”

end

## **The Horse and Rider Song**

*I Will Sing Unto the Lord For He Has Triumphed Gloriously  
The Horse and Rider Thrown into the Sea  
I Will Sing Unto the Lord For He Has Triumphed Gloriously  
The Horse and Rider Thrown into the Sea*

*The Lord, My God, My Strength My Song  
Has Now Become My Victory  
The Lord, My God, My Strength My Song  
Has Now Become My Victory*

*The Lord is God and I will praise Him  
My Fathers God and I will Exalt Him  
The Lord is God and I will praise Him  
My Fathers God and I will Exalt Him!*