

Series FolkSongs of Faith

This Message The LORD Has Done What Is Right and Just in Israel

Scripture Psalm 99

We have been looking at Psalm 90 through 100 for the specific purpose of expanding our insights into events associated with the end of the age. This collection of Psalms had a local and immediate context when they were written, but they also have a future context when studied with “eschatological eyes.”

The first of the Psalms in this series warned of approaching judgment, but there were assurances of protection for the people of God. We learned that the enemies of the LORD would perish but that the righteous would flourish in the courts of the LORD.

In another sequence, we learned how the people of God would sing for joy to the Rock of their salvation when He appeared. They would come and bow before Him in worship. God’s people from every nation would join in a new song of redemption, and even nature would join in the jubilant praises because the LORD was reigning. Both earth and heaven would proclaim His righteousness.

That very brief summary brings us to Psalm 99, our focus for today. Before we read, I want to point out the contrasts between Psalms 99 and the previous Psalm. In Psalm 98 the emphasis was on joy: “Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth; burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the LORD with harp, ... with trumpets and the blast of the ram’s horn.” The sea and everything in it are encouraged to participate; also the land and all who live on it. The shouting and singing were spontaneous and noisy because the LORD had come to judge the earth and the peoples with equity.

In Psalm 99 the mood is more solemn and restrained. You will notice that the writer of Psalm 99 continues to acknowledge the greatness of the LORD, but the emphasis on justice and holiness causes him to reflect on the past. As we read this Psalm you will notice that there are references to the Old Testament tabernacle and Zion, and to Old Testament era leaders. There is a reason for this backward look. This Psalm was written from the standpoint of Israelites and it specifically concerns people of Jewish background. Psalm 99 describes the Jews who will be welcomed by Jesus at the end of the age.

The Psalm describes how the Jewish people will reflect on their history, and how the LORD has treated them through the centuries with love, patience, and persistence. After reflection, they will conclude that the LORD had “done to them what was just and right.” The mood of the Psalm is joyful, but the words indicate a profound reverence and humility for what the LORD had done to and for the descendants of Abraham.

Read Psalm 99

We know from several Scripture sources that only a remnant of the Jews will survive the events at the end of the age. There are several prophecies about this in the Old Testament. The Old Testament prophets were greatly concerned about the rebelliousness of their fellow countrymen. They gave warnings about the judgments of God against them, but they usually tempered their pronouncements with words of hope. For example, Isaiah described the status of the Israelites this way: “Unless the LORD Almighty had left us some survivors, we would have become like Sodom, we would have become like Gomorrah” (*Isaiah 1:9*). Sodom and Gomorrah were two cities that were completely destroyed by God. The hope in this verse is in the reference to “survivors.” There would be only a few of them.

Isaiah also wrote: “In that day (the day of judgment) the LORD will thresh from the flowing Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt, and you, O Israelites, will be gathered up one by one. (The Euphrates was to the north and east of Jerusalem; the Wadi of Egypt was to the south and west.) And in that day a great trumpet will sound. Those who were perishing in Assyria (north and east) and those who were exiled in Egypt (south and west) will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain in Jerusalem” (*Isaiah 27:12-13*).

Again, the words of Isaiah: “In that day ... no longer will Jacob (the nation of Israel) be ashamed; no longer will their faces grow pale. ... They will acknowledge the holiness of the Holy One of Jacob, and will stand in awe of the God of Israel” (*Isaiah 29:22-24*).

Among the numerous prophecies about what will happen to the surviving members of the Jewish people, perhaps the most significant was provided by the prophet Zechariah. He wrote: “On that day ... I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a first-born son. On that Day the weeping in Jerusalem will be great. ... On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity. ... In the whole land,’ declares the LORD, ‘two-thirds will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it. This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say ‘They are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The LORD is our God’” (*Zechariah 12:10-11a; 13:1, 8-9*). All those references provide the necessary background for understanding Psalm 99.

The text in the Psalm is divided into three main sections, with each one ending with the refrain “He is holy.” We can assign descriptive titles to each section. In verses 1, 2, and 3 the Holiness of the LORD is Revealed in His Awesome Presence; in verses 4 and 5 the Holiness of the LORD is Revealed in His Justice; and, in the remaining verses, the Holiness of the LORD is Revealed in His Forgiveness.

The Psalm begins with the triumphant statement, “The LORD reigns.” We have understood this statement to be a recognition by the people at the end of the age of the LORD’s realized sovereignty over all the earth. The verb is in present tense in verse 1, meaning that the LORD has already exercised His authority and vanquished His foes and that He is no longer facing any challenges. Because of this fact, the nations are exhorted to “tremble.”

This trembling is not out of fear and foreboding. The word refers to the reaction of people who are in awe of their circumstances. All the people of God, and especially the Jewish survivors, will be in reverent awe as they stand before the LORD. Even though we as believers are confident about our eternal relationship with Jesus, and even though we know that we will be welcomed into His presence, and are eager to be with Him, our approach to Him might be with shaky legs, pounding hearts, and sweating palms. We will be trembling in awe as we approach Him.

The second part of verse 1 helps us to further understand the context of the trembling and shaking, at least from a Jewish perspective. The statement, “the LORD sits enthroned between the cherubim,” goes back to the Old Testament tabernacle and the Day of Atonement. When God gave instructions to Moses concerning the construction of the tabernacle, the first item He described was the chest which was to contain the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, Aaron’s rod, and a pot of manna. The cover for the chest was to be of pure gold. Two cherubim of hammered gold were to be on each end of the cover. The cherubim were to face each other, their faces were to be looking down, and their wings were to be spread upward, overshadowing the cover.

This chest was called the Ark of the Covenant and the cover was usually referred to as the Mercyseat, although it was also referred to as the Atonement cover. It was the place Yahweh said He would meet with Moses to give all His commands to the people (*Exodus 25:10-22*). Besides Moses, the only other person permitted to enter the inner room where the Ark of the Covenant with its Mercyseat cover was located was the High Priest, and He could only enter the room one time each year on the Day of Atonement, and he had to have the blood of a sacrifice animal to sprinkle on the Mercyseat as a covering for his own sins and those of the Israelites.

The space between the cherubim represented God’s presence among His people. Because of the sinfulness of the people, God had to keep His presence hidden, because, He said, “No one can look upon me and live” (*Exodus 33:20*). The Mercyseat was the only place where God could maintain His inherent holiness and yet dwell among His sinful and rebellious people. The cover of the ark came to be viewed as the throne of Yahweh. It also was described as the “footstool” of Yahweh, meaning that His throne was in heaven but that His feet touched earth on the Ark of the Covenant. By extension, the “footstool” later became a reference to the entire temple.

The cherubim who were positioned on top of the Mercyseat are very unique creatures. The prophet Ezekiel encountered the cherubim on two occasions, when “the heavens were opened and he saw visions of God” (*Ezekiel 1:1*). Ezekiel’s description of the cherubim are beyond our comprehension, even beyond our imaginations. He saw four of them. I won’t take the time to read to you how Ezekiel described them, but trust me, Hollywood has yet to come up with anything as incredible as the cherubim. If you want to challenge your imagination, read the first and tenth chapters of Ezekiel.

When Ezekiel first encountered them he saw a throne over them. He wrote that the figure on the throne “looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, ... and brilliant light surrounded him.” Ezekiel recognized that “this was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” (*Ezekiel 1:4-28; 10:1-22*). The cherubim were there in the presence of the LORD, very close to Him.

The first mention of cherubim in Scripture is in Genesis chapter 3. After the LORD God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, “he placed on the east side of the Garden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life” (*Genesis 3:23-24*). The responsibility of the cherubim was to prevent humans from access to the tree of life.

Another description of the cherubim is in the book of Revelation. John saw them positioned next to the throne of the “Ancient of Days” just as did Ezekiel. According to John, “Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’” (*Revelation 4:6-8*).

From the descriptions in the Bible, we conclude that the cherubim serve Yahweh in a very special way. They are associated with the glory of God. They have the responsibility to protect the holiness of Yahweh.

The cherubim are very impressive creatures, but the One who “sits enthroned near them” is much more awesome. And since Psalm 99 is a picture of this awesome God reigning on earth, it is no wonder that the nations tremble and the earth shakes. He is “the great LORD in Zion,” His chosen city on earth. “He is exalted over all nations.” “He is holy.” There is no other being like the LORD. He stands alone. And because He is the reigning LORD over all, He is to be worshiped by all.

In the second section of the Psalm, we learn that the quality of the LORD’s rule matches His character. In addition to being holy, He is “mighty,” and “he loves justice.” His majestic power is revealed in His actions. Verse 4 explains that Yahweh always acts in relation to His moral character. Because of His inherent nature, Yahweh “established equity” and “did what was just and right” for His chosen people. His actions “in Jacob” throughout the Old Testament revealed His inner nature and confirmed the quality of His justice. He must be exalted because of this aspect of His holiness.

I think the writer of this Psalm had the total history of Israel in mind although he wrote only a few brief statements about the actions of Yahweh. The writer recognized that Yahweh always acted justly and did what was right from the time of His call of Abram to building up of the family of Jacob; to the rescue of the descendants of Jacob from Egypt; to the establishment of the nation of Israel in the land of promise; through the periods of judgment at the hands of Israel's enemy nations; to the punishments inflicted on the Israelites by world powers; to the restoration of Judah after the exile; to the on-going preservation of Jacob all the way to the end of the age.

Throughout the Old Testament, Yahweh showered the Israelites with love and affection. He provided them with guidance, sustenance, protection, healing, and evidence of His presence throughout their history: during their years in the wilderness of Sinai, during the period of the Judges, and then through the time of the kings, during the years of exile in Babylon, and after their return to their land of Israel.

Yahweh also had to punish His people for their lack of faith in Him and their continual disobedience. He would not have been a just and righteous God if He had overlooked their sinful behavior. The Israelites did not genuinely appreciate God even though they went through the motions of religious ritual. Neither did they want to be the channel of blessing for the Gentile nations that God intended them to be.

We must think of Yahweh's justice in terms of His holy nature. For that reason, the people of God must "exalt the LORD" because He is their God. The surviving Jews will finally, after centuries of disobedience and neglect, be among those who will acknowledge the Lordship of their God. They will "exalt the LORD and worship at his footstool," in the physical presence of their King. It will be their privilege to do this because the LORD faithfully kept His promises to sustain them through every adverse circumstance of their earthly lives. The Jewish survivors will finally acknowledge that "He is holy." They will bow in acknowledgement of His justice and the rightness of His actions.

It is my opinion that the surviving Jews will take the lead in the worship of the LORD. The thought here is that those who are forgiven the most by Yahweh will be His most grateful worshippers. That the grace of Yahweh will extend to the descendants of Abraham is beyond our comprehension. They failed to live up to their privilege of being God's witnesses to the gentiles. They were exceedingly disobedient sinners, so much so that God said of them, "all day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people" (*Romans 10:21; Isaiah 65:2*). Yet God has been steadfast in His love for them because of unilateral promises made to Abraham, and, therefore, a surviving group of them will be forgiven and accepted into God's eternal kingdom.

Now we come to the third section of the Psalm. I suggested earlier that this section was a description of the holiness of the LORD as seen in His forgiveness. This third section is presented as an illustration of how God works His justice.

Moses, Aaron, and Samuel are presented by the Psalmist as three leaders who were powerful in prayer. Moses carried out priestly functions in getting the tabernacle set up and functioning. Moses was also a prophet (*Deuteronomy 18:15, 18*). He communicated the words of God to the people, most explicitly in all the details of the Law. Aaron was the first High Priest. Samuel was the last of the Judges who ruled in Israel, and he was also a prophet. These men are mentioned here because "they called on the LORD and he answered them" and because "they kept his statutes and the decrees he gave them.

Moses interceded for the people of Israel on many occasions, perhaps most crucially after the people engaged in idolatrous worship and revelry around the golden calf they had made. "Moses said to the people, 'You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin'" (*Exodus 32:30*). Moses then prayed to the LORD, "Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin, but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written" (*Exodus 32:31-32*).

Samuel interceded for the people of Israel when they were being pressured by the Philistines. Samuel gave instruction, "Rid yourselves of the foreign gods ... and commit yourselves to the LORD and serve him only." When Samuel "cried out to the LORD on Israel's behalf, the LORD answered him," and "the Philistines were routed before the Israelites" (*I Samuel 7:3-10*).

Later Samuel admonished the people with these words: “If you fear the LORD and serve and obey him and do not rebel against his commands, and if both you and the king who reigns over you follow the LORD your God, good! But if you do not obey the LORD, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you” (*1 Samuel 12:14-15*).

Verse 8 explains how, through the intercession of these men, God’s forgiveness extended to the nation of Israel, although there were consequences for the misdeeds of the people. This third section of the Psalm explains the balance between God’s faithfulness in answering prayer, His mercy in forgiving sin, and His righteousness in imposing punishment for sin. This is probably what it means back in verse 4, “The King has established equity.”

The point of application here is that the people of God must not take God’s mercy lightly. We must let both God’s holiness and His practice of justice influence our behavior. Our sin will always reap consequences, to ourselves and others. The Mosaic Covenant was conditional. Obedience to the Law would bring blessing; disobedience would bring just judgment. This is still true today. The New Testament did not do away with the consequences of sowing and reaping.

In verse 9 the psalmist repeated the refrain about the LORD’s holiness: “Exalt the LORD our God and worship at His holy mountain, for the LORD our God is holy.” He is to be exalted in Zion, exalted and “worshiped at His footstool” (verse 5), as well as exalted and “worshiped at His holy mountain” (verse 9). These are both references to the presence of God.

How do we exalt the LORD and show proper worship of Him? Just like the people of God back in the Old Testament, believers today need “to keep God’s statutes and decrees” (*Verse 7*).

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews summarized the theme of this Psalm in these words: “You have come to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. ... You have come to God, the Judge of all, ... and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant” (*Hebrews 12:22-24*). A few verses later, the writer gave this application: “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (*Hebrews 12:28-29*). (There’s another allusion to the word “tremble!”)

The Apostle Peter wrote these words: “As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (*1 Peter 1:14-16*).