

The Lord Reigns

Psalms for Uncertain Times

Psalm 96:1-13

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Everything in Subjection?

To set the stage for Psalm 96, I want to begin by reading Hebrews 2:8. It's speaking of Christ. Listen to what it says: "[God put] everything in subjection under his feet. Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him."¹ What's the point? Well, it's clear that Christ is king and everything is under his sovereign reign. But, that's not the way we often experience the world. Even though everything's in subjection to him, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. Individual people aren't in subjection. Many have not bowed the knee to Jesus. The demonic realm is not in subjection to him. The devil still prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Pet. 5:8). The nations are not in subjection to him. They still rage (Ps. 2:1). And creation itself is not yet in subjection to him. It still groans (Rom. 8:22).

This has been true throughout time. And it's still true today. But I think we feel it more acutely today. The world's not the way it's supposed to be. And we're experiencing that reality in a new way right now. Death and disease are spreading throughout our world. Our lives been disrupted. And that's not all. We can't even gather this morning for worship. It's the first Sunday of the month, but we can't celebrate the Lord's Supper. We can't wave our palms together. We won't gather on Good Friday. And we won't be together on Easter Sunday. We're feeling it.

At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But with that said, we need to remember Christ is still king! And everything is under his feet.

Psalm 90 taught us that a sober response is appropriate during our present crisis. We need to number our days in light of our mortality. But Psalm 96 teaches us a joyful response is appropriate too. We are to praise God because he reigns and he's going to make everything right in our world.

Psalm 96:1-13

¹*Oh sing to the LORD a new song;*

sing to the LORD, all the earth!

²*Sing to the LORD, bless his name;*

tell of his salvation from day to day.

³*Declare his glory among the nations,*

his marvelous works among all the peoples!

⁴*For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;*

he is to be feared above all gods.

⁵*For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,*

but the LORD made the heavens.

⁶*Splendor and majesty are before him;*

strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

⁷*Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!*

⁸*Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts!*

⁹*Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth!*

¹⁰*Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns!
Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity."*

¹¹*Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;*

¹²*let the field exult, and everything in it!*

Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy

¹³*before the LORD, for he comes,
for he comes to judge the earth.*

*He will judge the world in righteousness,
and the peoples in his faithfulness.*

Like I said, this psalm teaches us that we need to praise God, because he reigns and he's going to make everything right in this world.² The psalm is divided into three stanzas. Each stanza gives a call to praise God and a reason to praise God. What I want to do this morning is look at the three different ways this psalm calls for praise and the three reasons for praise. Then I want to try and build a bridge from this psalm to our lives today. And at the end, I want to offer three ways we should respond to this psalm.

STANZA ONE (1-6)

Let's begin with the first stanza in verses 1-6. This is the call: God's people should declare his salvation to the nations. It's a call to sing a new song among the nations. The call for a new song is not for a composer to write a new tune or even new lyrics to an old tune.³ In the Psalms, a new song is needed whenever there's a new occasion for praise, because of a new work in salvation. And that new work of salvation normally involves God defeating one of Israel's enemies in battle.⁴

Psalm 96 isn't new. It's actually like a cover song. Or like Don McLean's song "Bye, Bye, Miss American Pie" that references all kinds of other songs, from the Byrds to the Beatles. Most of Psalm 96 is found in 1 Chronicles 16.

In 1 Chronicles, after David was anointed king, God gave him salvation. He drove the Jebusites out of Jerusalem (1 Chron. 11). And so, David set up his throne in his enemy's former citadel.⁵ Then God saves him from the Philistines. And following his victories, God brought the fear of David on all the nations (1 Chron. 14:17). Then something remarkable happens.

² Mark D. Futato and George M. Schwab, *The Book of Psalms, The Book of Proverbs*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary

³ Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Praise: A Historical Commentary*

⁴ Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries

When all David's enemies are defeated and his throne's established, what's the first thing he does? He brings the ark of God into Jerusalem. This is a significant and symbolic act. The ark of God, as we learned in Exodus, represents the throne of God. So, bringing the ark to Jerusalem shows that David's throne and God's throne joined.⁶

God establishes his own reign through the reign of David—a reign that will last forever and extend to the ends of the earth (2 Sam. 7:13, 16; Ps. 89:36-37). All things will be put into subjection under God through his anointed king. In light of all this, David composed a song of praise to be sung as the ark comes into Jerusalem. A song extoling Yahweh as king. The God who saves and puts all his enemies under his feet.

So, Psalm 96 is not really a new song. It's simply a new occasion to praise God as king. We don't know the exact occasion for Psalm 96, but we know the exiles sang this psalm in Babylon.

They weren't experiencing the nations in subjection to God. But they knew God was king. And so, they sang this song. They needed to be reminded that even when things were out of control, God was still on his throne.

But this psalm not only calls the people of God to sing to the Lord. It also calls them to declare his glory among the nations (v. 3). They're called to tell others about the saving work of God. They're called to evangelize, in hope that the nations will also come to praise the Lord.

But why would the nations want to praise God? The reason is found in verses 4-6. The Lord is over all gods. God's work of salvation for his people shows the impotence of the other people's gods. And it shows the power of the one true God.

Anything we worship other than the one true God, anything we trust in to provide security, satisfaction, or salvation—they're all worthless idols. God's work of salvation exposes our idols. And God's work in creation exposes idols.

Man makes idols. But the Lord made the heavens. The heavens are where God sits enthroned above all creation in majesty.⁷

His work in creation and salvation should lead God's people to tell of his salvation. And it should lead the nations to turn away from their idols and turn to God in worship. The goal is that all the families of the earth would repent of their sins and submit to God as king.

STANZA TWO (7-10)

That's what's drawn out in the second stanza in verses 7-10. Here's the call: All peoples should submit to the Lord as king. Verse 7 says, "Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength! Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name."

To ascribe is to acknowledge publicly. But how do the nations come to acknowledge the Lord publicly?

The language in verses 8-9 evokes a picture of a subordinate nation paying tribute to the king of a sovereign nation. Paying tribute was a sign that you were submissive. So, if the nations acknowledge

⁶ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms: Discovering Their Structure and Theology*

⁷ Waltke

their gods are worthless and see that the Lord alone is glorious, then they'll bring an offering into his courts (they'll pay tribute) and they'll worship the Lord (literally bow down before him).⁸

Worship of God involves turning from false idols and submitting to God. And the goal of this psalm is that God will be worshiped by all nations, all peoples, all the earth.

Up to this point, we've seen the call to praise God, to sing to him, to ascribe glory to him. And we've seen hints that it's because God reigns as king over all the earth. But it's not until we get to verse 10 that we're fully exposed to the significance of it all.

In verse 10, we're told the Lord reigns. We knew that implicitly, but now we're told explicitly. We know the Lord is king, but we're also told why that matters for the nations. It's because the Lord will judge the nations. The one who is over all the earth will judge the peoples with equity.

This is the climax of the psalm. This is the reason for the nations to recognize the Lord as king. He will bring judgment upon them if they remain in rebellion. What has happened to other nations will happen to them.

Eventually, every knee will bow. It's certain. All things will come into subjection to God. You can count on it. Our Lord reigns and he will bring judgment. So, the nations need to repent of their rebellion. They need to turn from their false idols, before judgment comes, and submit to him. They need to receive his salvation.

STANZA THREE (11-13)

So far, we've seen the call for God's people to praise him. And the call for all peoples to praise him. But the third stanza in verses 11-13 takes things to a whole new level. Here we see the whole creation should rejoice. It's not only Israel and the nations, but the heavens and the earth and the sea. The fields and the forest. Let them all be glad and sing for joy!

And what's the reason? It sounds the same as the reason in the second stanza: "For the Lord comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness" (vv. 12b-13).

But the word "judge" here may be a little misleading. It's actually a different Hebrew word from the one in verse 10. And it has a slightly different meaning. It's not referring to punishment. That is a form of subjection, but it's not what's in mind here. When you think of God judging the earth, don't think of God sitting at the bench in a courtroom, making legal decisions. Instead, think of the Creator putting everything in his creation back into order.⁹ That's what the word means.

So, the reason the creation should rejoice is because it will be restored.

The creation is groaning, as Romans 8 tells us. It's in subjection to corruption. Things like death and disease grow, and thorns infest the ground. But when the creation starts to see the nations brought into subjection to God, they know their restoration is near. And so, they can rejoice. God is king. And eventually all the false gods will be put in their place, all people in rebellion against God will be subject to him, all nations will be subject to him, and even creation itself will be put back in order.

⁸ John Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Waltke

⁹ Futato

And so, the whole earth can sing a new song. The nations can ascribe glory to God. And the creation itself can rejoice.

BUILDING A BRIDGE

Clearly the promises of this psalm find application in different periods of redemptive history. It applied partially in David's day. It applied partially when the Israelites came out of captivity in Babylon. But its promises have not yet been fulfilled. So, at this point, I want to try to build a bridge from this psalm to today.

When Israel came back to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple, they sang this psalm at the dedication of the temple.¹⁰ During those days there was great anticipation that the throne of David would once more be joined to the throne of God. There was anticipation that the nations would be subdued and that they would come to praise God. But this didn't happen when they returned. Instead, they were under the control of the Persians and later the Romans.

But when Jesus came, this all began to change. The opening pages of the New Testament make it plain that Jesus was the promised Messiah. He came to fill the throne of David (Mt. 1:1-17). And the Gospels also show us that Jesus was Immanuel, God with us (Mt. 1:23). He tabernacled among us (Jn. 1:14). So, the throne of David and the throne of God were joined in Christ. Therefore, when he begins his ministry he announces, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. 4:17).

And at his coming, we see the nations slowly begin to come to him and worship him. At his birth, the Magi come from the east and bow down before him as king. And they bring him an offering (Mt. 2:1-12).

Then on the first Palm Sunday, something remarkable happens. When Jesus rides into Jerusalem, the people cry out, "Hosanna," or literally, "Save us." Then they go on, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel" (Jn. 12:13)

The people acknowledge Jesus as the Davidic king. And right after Jesus comes into Jerusalem, the Greeks come and ask to see Jesus (Jn. 12:20-21). Do you see? The Lord comes, as predicted in Psalm 96. But instead of Jesus coming into Jerusalem to bring judgment on the nations, the nations come to him.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem, it was different from what everybody expected. He didn't come at that time to subdue the nations. He came to save the nations (cf. Jn. 12:47). He came as king in glory. But his glory and majesty were seen in a way nobody imagined. The hour of his glory was the hour he was lifted up on the cross. Instead of bringing judgment, he took the judgment for our sins upon himself. He was lifted up on a cross to draw all people to himself (Jn. 12:27-33).

Following his resurrection, he was enthroned at the right hand of God. And God put all things in subjection under his feet. But at present, we do not yet see everything in subjection under him (Heb. 2:8). We have to wait until he comes again.

And on that day, everything will be made right. His enemies will be finally defeated. Death and disease will be no more. The creation will rejoice. And on that day, we're told in Revelation 7 that a

¹⁰ Daniel J. Estes, *Psalms 73–150*, New American Commentary. Estes says the superscription of the LXX says, "When the house was built after the captivity."

multitude from every tribe, tongue, and nation will stand before the throne and before the Lamb with palm branches in their hands and will cry out with a loud voice, and sing (a new song): “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (vv. 9-10).

In the meantime, we need to know that he is still king. He’s on his throne. He has saved. He will save. And he’s worthy of our praise.

APPLICATION

What should we do now as we wait for him? Let me suggest three things.

First of all, share the gospel. Friends, we need to tell of his salvation among the nations. The gods of the nations are worthless idols. And those idols are being exposed during this time. Now is a great time to tell people that only our God can give security, satisfaction, and salvation. Jesus came the first time to bring salvation. It’s our job to sing that new song to others until he comes to bring judgment.

And that brings me to my second point. Submit to Jesus—if you are still trusting in something other than Jesus Christ to give you security, satisfaction, and salvation. Now is the time for you to turn from those idols. Our God is king. And his Son is coming again to bring judgment on everyone who does not bow the knee to the Son.

Thankfully, Christ did not bring judgment when he came the first time. He came to provide salvation. And so now is the time to come to the Son. Repent of your sins. And place your trust in Jesus. Then submit to him as king, as Lord.

Finally, suffer with joy. I know it is a hard time right now. But friends, God is king! And he’s going to make everything right. He has worked salvation in the past. And he is going to complete it in the future. He’s going to restore the entire creation. Nothing will be broken anymore. You can take that to the bank. And the anticipation of that day should give us joy in these days.