

The LORD Reigns! (Psalm 96)

By Jacob D. Gerber

“Missions” is a word that has different meanings for different people. For some, a missions trip is an opportunity for travel and adventure. For others, missions is the work of bringing humanitarian aid to those in poverty who have physical needs. For others, serving in missions is a way to prove the depths of their spirituality. Yet, we should notice a common theme in all of these approaches to missions: they are all centered on us—on our desires, aspirations, and pursuits. Psalm 96 is so helpful in this regard, because this psalm reorients us to the real focal point of missions: God, his kingdom, and his glory. This psalm powerfully proclaims that *the gospel of God summons the world to worship*.

God is our Gospel (Ps. 96:1–6)

Psalm 96 begins with a threefold repetition of the same imperative: “Sing!” (vv. 1–2a). The psalmist instructs us first, to “Sing to the LORD a new song” (v. 1a). There are several ways in which the song we sing would be “new.” On the one hand, Allen Ross suggests that the newness of this song should “reflect a new event, a new experience of divine intervention....The reason that the psalms frequently call for a new song to be sung is that God’s faithfulness is new every day, making praise for him inexhaustible.”¹ Indeed, this psalm is written in such a way that it would be appropriate to sing after any and every new experience of, or appreciation for, God’s great works of creation and redemption.²

It is also possible, however, that the newness of the song has less to do with the *song*, and more to do with the *singers*, as suggested in the next line: “sing to the LORD, all the earth!” (v. 1b). Tucker and Grant remind us that, in Book 3 of the Psalter (Pss. 73–89), “the nations are, by and large, described as the enemies of the people of God and are those who mock the name of Yahweh, Israel’s God.”³ Book 4 of the Psalter (Pss. 90–106), however, suggests a remarkable shift, as the Lord comes to rule over and to judge the *whole* earth: “In that sense, the ‘newness’ of the song is probably twofold: first, those who do not know Yahweh are called to praise him, and second, those who do know Yahweh are reminded that the whole earth is called to join their ranks.”⁴

¹ Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms: Volume 3 (90–150)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2016), 3:136.

² Willem A. VanGemeren, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Psalms*, rev. ed., 5, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 723.

³ W. Dennis Tucker Jr. and Jamie A. Grant, *Psalms, Volume 2*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 412.

⁴ Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, ed. Nancy L. deClaisse-Walford, WBC 20 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 514.

In the third imperative to “sing,” the psalmist does give more direction as to the content of the song: “Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day” (v. 2). To bless the Lord’s *name* means “enhancing or enriching God’s reputation in the world through the praise. The idea of reputation comes from the meaning of ‘name’: it means his nature, who he is and what he does.”⁵ The word translated as “tell” in the ESV is perhaps under-translated, since this is not a generic word for speech, but frequently used to describe the report of a messenger who has just arrived from the heat of battle (e.g., 1 Sam. 4:17; 31:9; 2 Sam. 4:10; 18:19, 20, 26, 31; 1 Kgs. 1:42). Although the word can describe bringing news of defeat (1 Sam. 4:17), it is much more closely associated with the proclamation of the “good news” of Yahweh’s victory for his people, especially in the book of Isaiah (e.g., Isa. 40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1).⁶

Finally, the psalmist urges us to “Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!” (v. 3). To “declare” or “recount” carries the idea of listing out, or enumerating, all the facets of the Lord’s glory—especially, his “marvelous works,” but more fully, his “presence, power, and action in the world.”⁷ The recipient of this recounting of Yahweh’s glory is very important: “among *all* the peoples.” This is a missionary message, where we are charged with bringing the glad tidings of Yahweh’s great victory in the world for the salvation of *his* people to all the *other* peoples of the world. We bring these tidings not to taunt the peoples of the earth, or to boast over them, but to lead them to join *with us* in our singing to the Lord (v. 1b).

Therefore, v. 4–6 is written to teach the peoples of the earth *why* they should sing to and bless the Lord.⁸ Thus, in v. 4 and v. 5, we have statements that ground the imperatives: “For...” or “Because...” First, we read that we should praise the Lord because he is “great, and greatly [or, “exceedingly”] to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods” (v. 4). Second, in v. 5, we are given not only a reason to praise the Lord at all, but a further explanation of why Yahweh is “to be feared above all gods”: “For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens” (v. 5). As Ross explains, the psalmist tells us that the gods of the peoples are “‘worthless’ (literally “nothings,” אֱלִילִים [’*elilim*], v. 5). Some choose to translate this word as idols, which is in part what the word is describing; the Greek version chose “demons.” The word is a descriptive term of contempt....The false gods are ‘nothings,’ ‘non-entities.’”⁹ In marked contrast, the Lord is not worthless; rather, he “made the heavens” (v. 5).

Thus, the psalmist adds: “Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary” (v. 6). Yahweh is the King of kings, surrounded by the kind of splendor, majesty, strength, and beauty that would befit such magnificent royalty. This first major section of the psalm, then, tells us *that* the peoples of the earth should praise Yahweh, as well as sketching out the basic reasons *why* the peoples should praise Yahweh.

⁵ Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 3:136.

⁶ Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 512.

⁷ Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 512.

⁸ Tucker and Grant, *Psalms, Volume 2*, 415.

⁹ Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 3:138.

God's Worship is our Goal (Ps. 96:7–9)

If the previous section calls upon us to praise the Lord for his works of creation and redemption, then this section calls us to our own works of giving/ascribing glory, bringing an offering, coming into his courts, worshiping the Lord in the splendor of holiness, and trembling before him. Thus, the first section is focused on God, and this second section focuses on our response. To begin this section, the psalmist again repeats the same imperative three times—earlier, the word was “sing” (vv. 1–2a), and now, “ascribe” or “give” (vv. 7–8a).¹⁰

First, the psalmist identifies *who* should do the ascribing: “Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples” (v. 7a). The word for “families” (מִשְׁפְּחוֹת; *mišpeḥōt*) echoes one of the main parts of God’s promise to Abraham: “in you all the families [מִשְׁפְּחוֹת; *mišpeḥōt*] of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3).¹¹ On the meaning of this promise (and its envisioned fulfillment here in Psalm 96), Tate writes, “The concept of ‘family’ is sometimes extended to include the nation, the whole people as one enormous family (cf. Num 26:5–62; 1 Chr 1–9; Ezek 20:32; Zech 14:17–18).”¹² Once again, we see that the call to action in this psalm has a universal scope, extending *out* into every nation, and *down* into every individual family.

Second, the psalmist declares *what* the families of the peoples should ascribe: “ascribe to the LORD glory and strength! Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts” (v. 7b–8). As VanGemeren observes, the “glory” that the peoples are to bring to Yahweh “takes the form of concrete expressions of submission to Yahweh.”¹³ They are to bring themselves (“come into his courts”) and they are to bring their offerings to Yahweh when they come. This describes no mere formalism; this is whole-hearted, whole-person worship. As Christians reading this Psalm from the perspective of the New Testament, we know that the ultimate fulfillment of this came not by bringing the Gentiles to the physical temple in Jerusalem, but by tearing down the dividing wall of hostility that separated Jews and Gentiles, so that the two peoples may gather as one, worshiping new man in Christ (Eph. 2:14–16).¹⁴

Then, in v. 9, the psalmist gives final instructions for *how* to worship the Lord: “Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!” The “splendor of holiness” most generally

¹⁰ “The threefold imperative

‘ascribe’ (vv.7–8a) is symmetric with the threefold use of ‘sing’ (vv.1–2a). But the object of the imperative, as well as the imperatives that follow, shows a clear development.” (VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 724.)

¹¹ Tucker and Grant, *Psalms, Volume 2*, 417.

¹² Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 514.

¹³ VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 724.

¹⁴ “He calls upon the Gentile nations in so many words to render unto God the same worship which the Jews did; not that we must worship God now according to the outward ritual which was prescribed under the Law, but he signifies that there would be one rule and form of religion in which all nations should accord. Now, unless the middle wall of partition had been broken down, the Gentiles could not have entered along with God’s children into the courts of the sanctuary. So that we have here a clear prediction of the calling of the Gentiles, who needed to have their uncleanness taken away before they could be brought into the holy assembly.” (John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 4:54.)

refers to “garments that are ritually clean and acceptable in the sanctuary (see Lev. 11:24–8); the imagery means that those who would praise the LORD and bring him a gift of gratitude and dedication must be properly prepared to come into his presence.”¹⁵ As VanGemeran explains, “All may worship him, but the motivation is as important as the manner. Yahweh expects reverence, submission, holiness, and awe of his divine majesty and presence.”¹⁶ That is, this is not a call to wear ceremonial clothing; rather, this is a summons to come clothed in Christ’s robes of righteousness.

God's Kingdom is our Gladness (Ps. 96:10–13)

This final section is marked out by a closely related repetition of terms to bookend the beginning, in v. 10 (nations/world/peoples), and the end, in v. 13 (earth/world/peoples). Once again, this section begins with an imperative about our speech among the peoples of the earth: “Say among the nations, ‘The LORD reigns! Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity’” (v. 10). Tate summarizes and synthesizes the three declarations in v. 10: “Yahweh’s judgments “set things right,” punishing the wicked and granting help and protection for the righteous (cf. Deut 32:36; Ps 135:14; Job 35:14; Dan 7:22 with Isa 3:13–14; Ps 50:4). Sovereignty, stability, and equity are the key concepts.”¹⁷ Yahweh’s reign began at the beginning, when he established and fixed the world in its orbit. Although the *world* will never move, Yahweh comes to judge the peoples with equity to resolve the chaos and instability that human rebellion has brought *into* the world.

This thought helps to explain the rejoicing of creation at Yahweh’s arrival to judge the world: “Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth” (vv. 11–13a). At one level, there is an implied criticism by way of contrast with the created order: “*Everything* in the created order praises Yahweh; therefore, the implied suggestion is that *everyone* should also praise Yahweh!”¹⁸ Jesus suggested something similar to the Pharisees about the necessity for his disciples to praise him when said, “I tell you, if these [disciples] were silent, the very stones would cry out” (Luke 19:40). At another level, this connection helps to explain why Paul says that the creation groans in futility until the day of deliverance:¹⁹

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. (Rom. 8:19–22)

¹⁵ Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 3:140–41.

¹⁶ VanGemeran, *Psalms*, 724.

¹⁷ Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 515.

¹⁸ Tucker and Grant, *Psalms, Volume 2*, 419.

¹⁹ Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 3:142.

Human sin plunged even the created order into disarray. Thus, all creation will rejoice when Yahweh comes to judge the earth.

As the Psalmist stated earlier that Yahweh will “judge the peoples with equity” (v. 10), he closes by declaring that Yahweh “will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness” (v. 13b). Yahweh’s justice will be equitable, complete, righteous, and faithful. The declaration among the nations, then, that Yahweh reigns (v. 10) is a warning, and a summons to repent before Yahweh comes. Yet, this psalm does not simply warn the nations of impending doom for all who do not turn in faith to Yahweh. Rather, like elsewhere in the Psalter, there is a balance here between warning and promise: “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Ps. 2:12). In Psalm 96, the initial call is to join in the joy of the redeemed people of God by singing to him a new song (v. 1). Only at the end do we find a clear statement about the consequences of failing to join in this joy: the coming judgment of God. While the psalmist does attempt to sketch out proper reasons for fearing Yahweh, he demonstrates throughout this psalm the great joy that await those who willingly submit to him.

Discussion Questions

1. Why should we “sing to the LORD” (v. 1a)? What does it mean to sing a “new song” (v. 1a)? Whom does this psalm address? In other words, who should be singing a new song to the LORD? What should we sing about? Why is the LORD worthy of our praise and our worship? Why are the idols of the earth not worthy of our worship (v. 5)? How might our attention be distracted away from God and his glory in our worship?
2. What does it mean to “ascribe” something to the LORD (v. 7–8)? Who should be ascribing glory and strength to the LORD (v. 7)? Why does this worship lead us to bring an offering (v. 8b)? What does it mean for New Testament Christians to “bring an offering” to the LORD? What does v. 9 suggest about the manner in which we should approach the Lord in our worship? What is your attitude or disposition when you come to corporate worship on the Lord’s Day?
3. What is the connection between the LORD’s reign, the establishment of the world, and the judgment of the peoples (v. 10)? What effect on us does the psalmist intend to gain by linking these ideas together in this psalm? What effect will the coming judgment of the LORD have on the rest of creation (v. 11–12)? What should our response be as we think about the coming judgment of the LORD?
4. What does this psalm tell us about the true purpose of world missions? Have you ever participated in a missions work? If so, did the work you do reflect the spirit of Psalm 96? Why or why not? Have you ever considered entering into longer term missions work? What motivation does this psalm give us toward that end? Even if you never travel to a foreign country, how might you support the universal vision of Psalm 96?