



Psalm 96 - Praise to God Who Comes in Judgement

Introduction

This is a hymn celebrating how God's kingship over all creation means that all kinds of people should love and worship him. The psalm has three sections, each beginning with a command, i.e. 'sing,' v.1; 'ascribe,' v.7; and 'say,' v.10, and each mentioning the Gentiles, i.e. 'all the earth,' 'the nations,' and 'all the peoples' in vv.1-6; 'families of the peoples' and 'all the earth' in vv.7-9; and 'the nations,' 'the peoples,' 'the earth,' and 'the world' in vv.10-13.

God called Israel to be a vehicle of blessing for all mankind, bringing them knowledge of the true God for whom all human beings yearn, and this psalm keeps this mission prominent in the Israelites' view of the world and their role in it. Verses 8-9 even call the Gentiles to join Israel in their worship in God's courts.

The psalm looks forward to a time when the Lord will come and judge all peoples with equity, without specifying how this will take place. The term 'judge' is probably not limited to sifting between the righteous and the unrighteous; the wider sense of 'execute justice, rule justly' fits the context better: <<**He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more**>> (Isaiah 2:4), and: <<**His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked**>> (Isaiah 11:3-4). Thus the psalm is more focused on a time in which Gentiles acknowledge the true God, and the benefits that will bring to all the earth, than it is on the final judgement. Christians sing this, knowing that God has ushered in this long-awaited epoch with

the resurrection of Jesus. This psalm appears in 1 Chronicles 16:23-33, indicating that the people sang an adaptation or perhaps an early edition of it when David brought the ark to Jerusalem.

There are widening circles in this wonderful psalm. It first speaks to the people of God, then to all the nations of the earth, and finally to creation itself. There is no author attributed in the Hebrew text, but Psalm 96 contains the middle verses of the psalm David sang for the entrance of the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. It may be that David was the author.

Psalm 96:1-6 - Sing to the Lord All the Earth, for He Is Great!

The psalm begins by calling the inhabitants of all the earth to sing to the Lord. The activities, i.e. 'sing to the Lord,' 'bless his name,' 'tell of his salvation,' 'praised' and 'revered') all describe the privilege of Israelite worship in God's sanctuary; here the Gentiles are invited to join in; refer also to vv.8-9.

- 1 O 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 marvellous works among all the peoples.

Psalm 96:1-3

O sing to the Lord a new song. God loves to receive the rejoicing and praise of his people expressed in song, especially the new song. The new song can come from an old saint as they gain fresh awareness of God's love and grace. Scripture says: <<*Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the end of the earth! Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants*>> (Isaiah 42:10), and: <<*They sing a new song: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation'*>> (Revelation 5:9).

Charles Spurgeon commented, "A new song, always new; keep up the freshness of your praise. Do not drivel down into dull routine. The drowsy old clerks in the dreary old churches used always to say, 'Let us sing to the praise and glory of God such-and- such a psalm,' till I should think the poor old Tate and Brady version was pretty well used up. We have new mercies to celebrate, therefore we must have new songs."

New songs do not simply have to be new lyrics or musical scores; it refers as much to a change in the attitude of heart of the singer as they completely surrender themselves to god as they praise him.

Sing to the Lord, all the earth. Praise is due to Yahweh from all the earth. He is not a local deity for Israel only. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the psalmist saw a day when all the earth would sing praise to the Lord, described in its fulfilment in Revelation 5:9.

Tell of his salvation from day to day. These songs to the Lord were not only celebrations; they were also proclamations. They proclaimed his salvation and declared his glory and his marvellous works to the entire world, to the nations.

⁴ For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.

⁵ For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.

Psalm 96:4-5

For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised. The psalmist would not give God empty or unthinking praise. He spoke first regarding the simple greatness of God, and noted that his greatness made him greatly to be praised. Yahweh deserves worship from the entire earth because he is not like the gods and idols of the pagans. He is the Creator who made the heavens.

These verses explain to the Gentiles that there is only one God truly worthy of worship. He is to be revered above all gods because he made the heavens, while they are powerless, indeed unreal: <<*There you will serve other gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell*>> (Deuteronomy 4:28), <<*Truly, O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands, and have hurled their gods into the fire, though they were no gods but the work of human hands – wood and stone – and so they were destroyed. So now, O Lord our God, save us, I pray you, from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Lord, are God alone*>> (2 Kings 19:17-19), <<*Alas for you who say to the wood, ‘Wake up!’ to silent stone, ‘Rouse yourself!’ Can it teach? See, it is plated with gold and silver, and there is no breath in it at all*>> (Habakkuk 2:19), and: <<*You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods*>> (Acts 19:26).

The words gods, Hebrew 'elohim, and worthless idols, Hebrew 'elilim, sound alike, providing a play on words; in English this would be close to 'these mighty beings are mighty useless!'

- ⁶ Honour and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

Psalm 96:6

Honour and majesty are before him. God's greatness and power give him a regal, royal bearing. He is marked by strength and beauty. Honour and majesty describe royal magnificence: <<*His glory is great through your help; splendour and majesty you bestow on him*>> (Psalm 21:5), and: <<*Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one, in your glory and majesty*>> (Psalm 45:3), which is suited to the theme of divine kingship: <<*Deck yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendour*>> (Job 40:10), <<*Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honour and majesty*>> (Psalm 104:1), <<*Full of honour and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures for ever*>> (Psalm 111:3), and: <<*Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable*>> (Psalm 145:3). These, along with strength and beauty, are attributes of God, into whose presence people come in his sanctuary.

Spurgeon commented further, "In him are combined all that is mighty and lovely, powerful and resplendent. We have seen rugged strength devoid of beauty, we have also seen elegance without strength; the union of the two is greatly to be admired." And again, "Not in outward show or parade of costly robes does the glory of God consist; such things are tricks of state with which the ignorant are dazzled; holiness, justice, wisdom, grace, these are the splendours of Jehovah's courts, these the jewels and the gold, the regalia, and the pomp of the courts of heaven."

Herod Antipas was one king who tried to bask in his own glory and paid the price for doing so: <<*On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat on the platform, and delivered a public address to them. The people kept shouting, 'The voice of a god, and not of a mortal!' And immediately, because he had not given the glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died*>> (Acts 12:21-23). In Jewish Antiquities 19:343-350, Josephus supports Luke's account given in Acts.

Psalm 96:7-9 - All Nations, Ascribe Glory to the Lord!

These verses develop the thought of v.7, inviting the Gentiles to worship into his courts, i.e. in the temple precincts. The OT describes the future era, when the Gentiles receive the light, by picturing them coming to the Jerusalem temple: <<*In*

days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem>> (Isaiah 2:2-3); even the lesser temple after the exile: <<and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendour, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts>> (Haggai 2:7-9). The Gentiles are to bring an offering and to worship the Lord in the splendour of holiness, i.e. the splendid presence of the all-holy one. Their uncleanness can be cured by conversion, and then they too will be welcome in God's house: <<Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion! Put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for the uncircumcised and the unclean shall enter you no more>> (Isaiah 52:1).

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 holy splendour;
tremble before him, all the earth.

Psalm 96:7-9

Ascribe is repeated three times. These three lines are very similar to: <<*Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name; worship the Lord in holy splendour*>> (Psalm 29:1-2), except that there the heavenly beings are called to worship, while here it is the families of the peoples, i.e. the Gentiles.

Strength looks back to the same word in v.6, and glory, Hebrew *kabod*, is a synonym of 'beauty' (Hebrew *tip'eret*). Verse 6 listed God's attributes, and the Gentiles are called to 'ascribe' or acknowledge these attributes. The glory due his name is the respect and honour God's character deserves.

O families of the peoples. God promised Abraham, <<*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*>> (Genesis 12:3b), and that promise would be fulfilled in Abraham's greatest descendant, Jesus the Messiah. The same word for families found in Genesis 12:3 is used in v.7: Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the

peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Verse 7 has in mind the fulfilment of that promise.

Bring an offering, and come into his courts. Sacrifice is appropriate for the worshipper. True worship is often revealed by sacrifice in some way. With this in mind Paul exhorted all Christians: <<*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship*>> (Romans 12:1).

Worship the Lord in holy splendour is often translated as ‘the beauty of holiness’ and used in many songs in this form. The psalmist called the world to worship God in recognition of his holiness, and to see that there is a beauty connected to his holiness. Beauty and holiness are not often connected ideas in popular culture. Yet in reality, there is surpassing allure and attractiveness in true holiness. If a purported type of holiness has little beauty, it may be questioned if it is true holiness. God’s holiness - his ‘set-apart-ness’ - has a wonderful and distinct beauty about it. It is beautiful that God is God and not man; that he is more than the greatest man or a super-man. His holy love, grace, justice, and majesty are beautiful.

Psalm 96:10-13 - Let All Nations Know that the Lord Will Judge in Righteousness.

The Gentiles addressed throughout this psalm (v.1 and v.7) are to spread the news among all their fellow Gentiles, i.e. <<*among the nations*>> (v.3 and v.10), namely, that the Lord reigns! The universal rule of the one true God, who is above all other gods, who are worthless anyway (vv.4-5) is good news to those who will acknowledge his kingship.

These verses describe a time when God will judge, i.e. rule justly (refer to the comment made on Psalm 96) the peoples with equity. When all kinds of people gladly receive God’s rule, worshipping him according to his gracious character, the rest of the creation, i.e. the heavens, the earth, the sea, and the field with all their inhabitants, and the trees of the forest, will all celebrate, that is, be glad, rejoice, roar, exult, and sing for joy. The creation suffers from the curse upon mankind, from God’s discipline of wayward human beings, and from the evil that people do; but when they genuinely come under the rule of the true God, the blessings will spread throughout the world; refer to the comment made on Romans 8:20-21.

¹⁰ Say among the nations, ‘The Lord is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
He will judge the peoples with equity.’

Psalm 96:10

Say among the nations. The theme of speaking to the entire earth continues, calling them to worship and honour God as they should.

The Lord is king! And he reigns from on high. This is a fundamental and powerful message for God's people to proclaim to the world. Whether others recognise his reign or not, the Lord nevertheless reigns, and that reign will one day be openly and obviously imposed upon the entire world.

The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. The world is founded on secure moral principles, the unchanging character of God, i.e. equity, righteousness and faithfulness (v.13). God's people are also meant to tell the world that his work as Maker of the earth is good and lasting. He did not make the world in a sloppy way; it is firmly established, so that it shall not be moved. Refer also to the comment made on Psalm 93:1.

He will judge the peoples with equity. The world also needs to hear that God is a righteous judge, before whom the whole world must give account: *<<For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil>>* (2 Corinthians 5:10), *<<It was also about these that Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, 'See, the Lord is coming with tens of thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgement on all, and to convict everyone of all the deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him'>>* (Jude 14-15), and: *<<Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books>>* (Revelation 20:11-12). When the world hears and believes this, they will rightly prepare themselves for that judgement to come.

- 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 is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.

Psalm 96:11-13

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice. The thought introduced in the previous line is used as reason for all creation to be glad. The fact that God is a righteous judge who will call things into account will be good for creation - good for the heavens, the earth, the sea, the field, and all the trees. Paul probably had this concept in mind when he wrote: <<*For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God*>> (Romans 8:19-21).

For he is coming to judge the earth. The psalm ends with the joyful confidence that God will judge and set things right. The goodness of this is apparent to those who love God, love his ways, and hurt over the injustices of the present age. Spurgeon observed, "To rule it with discretion; not to tax it, and control it by force, as kings often do, but to preside as magistrates do whose business it is to see justice carried out between man and man." As C. S. Lewis pointed out, the ancients lived in a world where judges usually needed to be bribed and right judgement was exceedingly hard to come by, especially for weak, poor, or disadvantaged persons. In such a climate, the disadvantaged did not fear judgement but rather longed for it, because it meant a day when evil would be punished and those who did the right things would be vindicated.

Again Spurgeon commented, "Honesty, veracity, integrity, will rule upon his judgement-seat. No nation shall be favoured there, and none be made to suffer through prejudice. The black man shall be tried by the same law as his white master, the aboriginal shall have justice executed for him against his civilised exterminator, the crushed and hunted Bushman shall have space to appeal against the Boer who slaughtered his tribe, and the South Sea Islander shall gain attention to his piteous plaint against the treacherous wretch who kidnapped him from his home. There shall be true judgement given without fear or favour. In all this let the nations be glad, and the universe rejoice."