



## Psalm 97 - The Glory of God's Reign

### Introduction

Psalm 97 continues in the theme and tone of the surrounding psalms. It uses phrases many found in other psalms or passages from the Hebrew Scriptures. This is a hymn celebrating God's kingship over all his creation (refer to the comment made on Psalm 93), particularly focusing on how God's universal rule assures the faithful of his final victory over evil and idolatry. This victory involves God's protection of his faithful ones from evildoers, the vindication of Zion as God's chosen place for revealing himself, and the Gentiles ultimately coming to know the true God. Such assurance does not come from observing the course of events in the world, as God's universal kingship is often invisible; it is an affirmation of biblical faith that produces profound joy in those who embrace it.

The psalm has a number of echoes of the Pentateuch, especially Exodus: e.g. v.1 ('the Lord is king' or 'the Lord reigns') and Exodus 15:18; vv.2-5 and Exodus 19:9, 19:16, and 19:18 (God's appearance at Sinai); v.6 and Exodus 16:7 ('behold his glory') and: <<***all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord***>> (Numbers 14:21b); and v.9 and Exodus 15:11 (the Lord is exalted far above all other gods).

The reference to Zion hearing and being glad in v.8 indicates that the psalm arose from some great deliverance of the city, although the particular deliverance in view is not clear.

### Psalm 97:1-5 - The Glorious Presence of the Lord.

In words that echo the appearance of God's glory on Sinai: <<***On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like***>>

*the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently>> (Exodus 19:16-18), <<But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children – how you once stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, 'Assemble the people for me, and I will let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me as long as they live on the earth, and may teach their children to do so'; you approached and stood at the foot of the mountain while the mountain was blazing up to the very heavens, shrouded in dark clouds>> (Deuteronomy 4:11), and: <<These words the Lord spoke with a loud voice to your whole assembly at the mountain, out of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, and he added no more. He wrote them on two stone tablets, and gave them to me>> (Deuteronomy 5:22), the psalm describes the magnificence of God's presence.*

The clouds and thick darkness (v.2) convey the mystery of God's unapproachable majesty, while righteousness and justice as the foundation of his throne show that the mysterious majesty is not that of an arbitrary despot but of one who can be trusted. The expressions <<*consumes his adversaries on every side*>> (v.3), <<*the earth sees and trembles*>> (v.4), and <<*melt like wax*>> (v.5), reminiscent of: <<*As smoke is driven away, so drive them away; as wax melts before the fire, let the wicked perish before God*>> (Psalm 68:2), and: <<*Then the mountains will melt under him and the valleys will burst open, like wax near the fire, like waters poured down a steep place*>> (Micah 1:4), direct the singers' attention to how the universal kingship of God means that he is completely able to clear away all opposition. Although the psalms can certainly describe God's coming judgement on those who disbelieve him, whether in Israel or among the nations, that is not the focus here: this psalm looks forward to the Gentiles coming to know the magnificent Creator and Ruler of all; and thus, let the earth and its inhabitants rejoice (v.1).

<sup>1</sup> The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice;  
let the many coastlands be glad!

### Psalm 97:1

The Lord is king! Like Psalm 93, Psalm 97 begins suddenly and wonderfully, with the proclamation of Yahweh's rule. He is not a useless idol or local deity. Yahweh is not passive, nor the 'watchmaker' who created all things and then left it alone. He reigns; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob actively plans, acts, and rules over the universe.

Let the earth rejoice. Yahweh's reign brings joy to the earth. The reader could imagine an evil or dark deity whose reign would bring terror. They see such in a

limited sense, where men and devils are given room to exercise their wicked will. Yet the more Yahweh's reign is obvious and observed, the more rejoicing there is, extending to the many coastlands, the most distant places.

Let the many coastlands be glad! The biblical authors commonly used the nations around the Mediterranean Sea as representatives of all nations everywhere: <<*He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching*>> (Isaiah 42:4).

<sup>2</sup> Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;  
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.

<sup>3</sup> Fire goes before him,  
and consumes his adversaries on every side.

<sup>4</sup> His lightnings light up the world;  
the earth sees and trembles.

<sup>5</sup> The mountains melt like wax before the Lord,  
before the Lord of all the earth.

#### Psalm 97:2-5

Clouds and thick darkness are all around him. The psalmist may have in mind the appearance of God at Mount Sinai, which was marked by a thick cloud on the mountain and the smoke of a furnace: <<*On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. When the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up*>> (Exodus 19:16-20).

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. God's throne is not based on hereditary right or deception or bribery or the blood of conquest. The foundation of His throne is nothing else but righteousness and justice. This is why the earth can rejoice at his reign (v.1).

Fire goes before him. This is a poetic description of the same kind of phenomenon that happened at Mount Sinai; see above. This either remembers what God did

then or uses the same ideas to describe a future display of God's sovereign presence, i.e. before the Lord of all the earth, when <<*all the people behold his glory*>> (v.6b).

Adam Clarke had a curious thought regarding fire goes before him: "Literally, this and the following verse may refer to the electric fluid, or to manifestations of the Divine displeasure, in which, by means of ethereal fire, God consumed his enemies."

The mountains melt like wax before the Lord. Spurgeon noted, "Men cannot move the hills, with difficulty do they climb them, with incredible toil do they pierce their way through their fastnesses, but it is not so with the Lord, his presence makes a clear pathway, obstacles disappear, a highway is made, and that not by his hand as though it cost him pains, but by his mere presence, for power goes forth from him with a word or a glance."

#### Psalm 97:6-9 - He Is High above All Gods, Therefore Worship Him Alone.

These verses concern the false worship found among the nations who are 'worshippers of images' (v.7), comparing the false gods to the Lord, 'who is most high over all the earth and exalted far above all gods' (v.9). The purpose here is not to gloat but to look forward to the time when all the peoples see his glory: the OT anticipates this era: <<*Then the Lord said, 'I do forgive, just as you have asked; nevertheless – as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord – none of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice*>> (Numbers 14:20-22), and connects it to the reign of the Davidic Messiah: <<*A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. 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. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious*>> (Isaiah 11:1-10).

There is a general declaration to all mankind when ‘the heavens proclaim his righteousness’ (v.6), and one day the specific message of redemption will come to the nations as well. Zion hears and is glad (v.8), because God’s judgements, his historical acts that protect his people, provide the assurance that the purpose for which Israel was called will in fact be carried out.

- 6 The heavens proclaim his righteousness;  
and all the peoples behold his glory.
- 7 All worshippers of images are put to shame,  
those who make their boast in worthless idols;  
all gods bow down before him.
- 8 Zion hears and is glad,  
and the towns of Judah rejoice,  
because of your judgements, O God.
- 9 For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth;  
you are exalted far above all gods.

#### Psalm 97:6-9

The heavens proclaim his righteousness; and all the peoples behold his glory.

This will be more eminently the case at the Second Coming when the trumpet of the archangel shall proclaim his approach in the clouds of heaven, and all the tribes of the earth shall see him coming in the glory of his Father, with the holy angels; refer also to 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 and Jude 14-15.

All worshippers of images are put to shame. Considering the greatness and awe of Yahweh, those who boast of idols should be ashamed. Poetically speaking, even the gods of the heathen worship him.

All gods bow down before him. The Septuagint translators rendered this phrase into Greek as ‘worship him, all you his angels,’ and this may be the OT text quoted in Hebrews 1:6. The author of Hebrews, like other NT authors, is willing to apply OT texts about the Lord (Yahweh) to Jesus: <<And, ‘In the beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing; like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never end’>> (Hebrews 1:10-12), using Psalm 102:25-27; these authors were not saying that the OT texts were directly messianic, but they were certainly recognising that if Jesus was in fact the God of Israel in human flesh: <<And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his

*glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth*>> (John 1:14), then these texts apply to him.

Zion hears and is glad. The whole earth benefits from the majestic and awesome revelation of God, but his people are especially glad. His righteous judgements make the towns of Judah rejoice.

For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth. Previously the psalmist spoke about God and to the world. Here he turned his attention toward God directly, praising and extolling him as exalted far above all gods.

### Psalm 97:10-12 - Hate Evil and Rejoice in the Lord.

This assurance for the big story of the whole world enables all of the faithful to live their little stories in faith, i.e. to hate evil and to reject all its attractions. If God's righteous purpose will prevail in his world, this means that individual godly people will know his care and protection in their own lives. God fills their lives with light and joy, and when they realise this, they willingly rejoice in the Lord and give thanks to his holy name. The stanza has several terms for the same group of people, whose faith is genuine: those who love the Lord by hating evil (v.10); God's faithful saints (v.10); the 'upright in heart' (v.11), and 'righteous' (vv.11-12).

- 10 The Lord loves those who hate evil;  
he guards the lives of his faithful;  
he rescues them from the hand of the wicked.
- 11 Light dawns for the righteous,  
and joy for the upright in heart.
- 12 Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous,  
and give thanks to his holy name!

### Psalm 97:10-12

The Lord loves those who hate evil. Despite the seemingly abrupt transition, the psalmist sensibly connected the appearance of the God whose very throne is founded on righteousness and justice with the heart for righteousness and justice that his people should also have: <<*For the Lord loves justice; he will not forsake his faithful ones. The righteous shall be kept safe for ever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off*>> (Psalm 37:28), and: <<*he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly, guarding the paths of justice and preserving the way of his faithful ones*>> (Proverbs 2:7-8). It may be that this command is one of the most often broken

among God's people. Christians often find it easy to be too loving, or rather express a twisted love that pretends to both love the Lord and love or accept the things that he hates. Scripture teaches: <<***And he said to humankind, "Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding"***>> (Job 28:28), <<***Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph***>> (Amos 5:15), and: <<***Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good***>> (Romans 12:9).

He guards the lives of his faithful. The psalmist described many ways that God blesses and protects his people:

- He cares for their souls.
- He delivers them from the wicked.
- He sends light before their path.
- He gives gladness unto them.

Spurgeon observes, "He may leave the bodies of his persecuted saints in the hand of the wicked, but not their souls, these are very dear to him, and he preserves them safe in his bosom."

Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous. Considering the greatness of God and his goodness to his people, it is proper for them to rejoice in him: <<***Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice***>> (Philippians 4:4). The rejoicing should not be primarily in what he has given, but in the Lord himself - with plenty of thanksgiving at even the remembrance of his holy name.