



Psalm 98 - Praise the Judge of the World

A Psalm.

Introduction

This hymn celebrates God's universal kingship by referring to the marvellous things and salvation that God has worked in the sight of the Gentiles, on behalf of his people. The flow of thought is straightforward: God has worked salvation, i.e. rescue from evil for Israel, which all the ends of the earth have seen; all people in the earth should join Israel's celebration, because God is their rightful king, too; the material creation should join all mankind in jubilant praise of the one true God, as they look forward to his rule.

There are many overlaps with Psalm 96, as in the opening invitation; the interest in the Gentiles; the rejoicing of the material world; and the Lord as universal judge. This psalm lies behind Isaac Watts' famous hymn 'Joy to the World.' The psalm and the hymn have come to be associated with Christmas; like Psalm 96, this is not inappropriate provided it is clear that the coming of Jesus as the Davidic king who will bring light to the Gentiles is what establishes the connection.

This psalm is simply titled, A Psalm, and it is the only one given that simple title with no other explanation. Like Psalm 96, it speaks of praise to God for his work of salvation in widening circles - first Israel, then all the earth, finally all creation. James Montgomery Boice explains, "There are striking parallels between the first part of Psalm 98 and Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), which may mean that the mother of Jesus had the psalm in mind as she composed her hymn and that she rightly saw that the promises of the psalm were to be fulfilled in the spiritual victories to be achieved by Jesus Christ."

Psalm 98:1-3 - Sing, for God Has Worked Salvation for His People.

This section calls on God's people to sing aloud together in celebration of God's faithfulness to his promises. The term victory, often translated as salvation, appears in each verse of this section; it describes the great deeds of God for the

sake of his people as a whole, providing protection from their enemies and the conditions in which piety can flourish, as did the deliverance from Egypt; refer to Exodus 14:13, 14:30, and 15:2. Several other terms are used for the same deeds: marvellous things (v.1), i.e. deeds that display God's supernatural control over events; his righteousness (v.2), God's faithfulness in keeping his promises; God has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness (v.3), refer to the comments made on Exodus 2:24 and 34:6, and Psalm 25:6-7. God has done these great deeds to the house of Israel (v.3), but the benefit is not limited to them: all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of God, i.e. the 'salvation' he has worked for Israel, as described in vv.1-2. The next stanza will invite the rest of the nations to join in the song.

¹ O sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvellous things.
His right hand and his holy arm
have gained him victory.

Psalm 98:1

O sing to the Lord a new song. The idea of a new song is found in many places in Scripture, e.g. Psalms 33:3, 40:3, 96:1, 144:9 and 149:1, Isaiah 42:10, and Revelation 5:9 and 14:3. The concept of the new song means there should be something fresh and dynamic about worship and the songs that are sung to God. Refer to the comment made on Psalm 33:1-3.

For he has done marvellous things. These are the instruments of God's victory, the expressions of his skill and strength. As in: <<*The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God*>> (Isaiah 52:10), the idea of his holy arm is that God has rolled up his sleeve to do his mighty work - they have gained him the victory.

On his right hand Charles Spurgeon observed, "You know that we use the word 'dexterous' to signify a thing that is done well, we mean that it was done right-handedly. So Christ fought our battle with his right hand; he did it with ease, with strength, and with infinite wisdom."

² The Lord has made known his victory;
he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.
³ He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen
the victory of our God.

Psalm 98:2-3

The Lord has made known his victory or his salvation. The marvellous things of v.1 have been published in the sight of the nations:

- This is true, because of the public nature of God's unfolding work of redemption.
- This is a prophecy, of a coming day when all the earth will see and hear.
- This is an exhortation to God's people to proclaim the message of his salvation and righteousness.

On made known Spurgeon commented, "The Lord is to be praised not only for effecting human salvation, but also for making it known, for man would never have discovered it for himself." The NT shows that God has made known his victory and his salvation in a way far beyond the psalmist's expectation. The person and work of Jesus Christ and the worldwide spread of the Gospel are fulfilments of this: *<<Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel'>>* (Luke 2:28-32).

He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. One of God's marvellous things is his unending mercy and faithfulness to the covenant people of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is strange to think that some believe God has forgotten his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel, including those who believe that Jews today must become Christians in order to be saved, whereas Paul wrote: *<<And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree>>* (Romans 11:23-24).

All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God. There was a sort of centre or focus of God's work in the house of Israel, but the ends of the earth were never to be forgotten. From the very beginning of his covenant plan with Abraham, all the families of the earth were in view: *<<I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed>>* (Genesis 12:3).

Psalm 98:4-6 - Let All the Earth Sing Loudly and Joyfully.

The previous section ended with *<<all the ends of the earth>>*; this section addresses all the earth, i.e. all the people who dwell in all the earth. These varied peoples are all invited to join the joyous song offered to the one true God. What God has done for Israel is for the sake of bringing the light to the whole world.

- 4 Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

Psalm 98:4

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Since the great news of God's marvellous things (v.1) goes to the ends of the earth (v.3), it is right for all the earth to praise Yahweh: <<*Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it; shout, O depths of the earth; break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest, and every tree in it! For the Lord has redeemed Jacob, and will be glorified in Israel*>> (Isaiah 44:23).

Break forth into joyous song and sing praises. The praise is to be enthusiastic, varied, and in song. This is the opposite of the dreary singing of sombre songs.

- 5 Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.
- 6 With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.

Psalm 98:5-6

Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre. This can be understood in two senses. The first is that musical instruments should accompany the singing of v.4. The second is that the instruments themselves sing to the Lord a song of praise.

With the lyre; with trumpets and the sound of the horn. The idea is that there was a band of musicians assisting the praise of the song, the psalm, and the joyful shout. The combination of instruments assumes some level of effort and skill among the musicians. The horn or shofar proclaimed such events as the year of jubilee, or the accession of a king: <<*Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month – on the day of atonement – you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land*>> (Leviticus 25:9), and: <<*There the priest Zadok took the horn of oil from the tent and anointed Solomon. Then they blew the trumpet, and all the people said, 'Long live King Solomon!'*>> (1 Kings 1:39).



A Ram's Horn or Shofar

Psalm 98:7-9 - Let all Nature Join in the Song.

This section extends the invitation from the human inhabitants of the world to include even the sea and all that fills it, the rivers, and the hills. The entire creation, human and otherwise, can rejoice at the prospect of God's just rule.

Human beings were made to submit to God's rule and to govern the creation in wisdom and love; when they acknowledge God's kingship, they and the rest of the creation will flourish.

- 7 Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who live in it.
- 8 Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing together for joy
- 9 at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming
to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.

Psalm 98:7-9

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it. The musical instruments mentioned in the previous verses were not enough to give God the praise he deserves. Now the sea itself is called to add its roar to the sound of praise. The rivers and hills are brought into the worship team with their joyful sounds.

The world and those who live in it. The poetic image of praise from inanimate creation is wonderful, but not enough. The praise should also come from those who dwell in it – perhaps a reference not only to people, but the animal world as well.

For he is coming to judge the earth. The strong and deep praise described in this psalm is not only for the marvellous things God has done (v.1). It is also for the work he is about to do – he will judge the world with righteousness. His righteous rule and reign is a welcome relief for all creation that has suffered under the sin and rebellion of mankind. As in: <<*Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy 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 96:12b-13), the sense of judge is 'administer justice through a just rule'; refer also to the comments made on Psalm 96.

And the peoples with equity. In the ancient world, and still sometimes in the present day), justice was rare. Judges were bribed or turned by ideology and prejudice. The idea of coming judgement with equity was a great relief to those who were often oppressed and denied justice. As with Psalm 96, this is realised under the kingly rule of the Messiah.